

AESTHETIC EXPERIENCE IN PERFORMANCE ART: MARINA ABRAMOVIĆ  
THE ARTIST IS PRESENT

A Master's Thesis

by

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Ankara

August 2013



*Dedicated to those who lost their lives during the Gezi Park Protests.*

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Graduate School of Economics and Social Sciences  
of  
İhsan Dođramacı Bilkent University

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MASTER OF ARTS

in

THE DEPARTMENT OF  
COMMUNICATION AND DESIGN  
İHSAN DOĐRAMACI BİLKENT UNIVERSITY  
ANKARA

August 2013

I certify that I have read this thesis and in my opinion it is fully adequate, in scope and in quality a thesis for the degree of Master of Arts in Communication and Design.

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## ABSTRACT

### AESTHETIC EXPERIENCE IN PERFORMANCE ART: MARINA ABRAMOVIĆ THE ARTIST IS PRESENT

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August 2013

This thesis explores the possibility of an embodied, corporeal and transforming aesthetic experience that performance art may reveal. The artistic practice of Marina Abramović, who witnessed and pioneered the paradigm shifts in the performance art sphere, will be examined in conjunction with the performative turn and affective turn that art has been going through. In addition to a comprehensive overview of the former academic studies done on Abramović's body of work, her latest performance *The Artist Is Present* (2010) and the critical reception it received will be discussed within the framework of aesthetic experience as a path to affective encounter in the area of contemporary performance art. John Dewey's idea of art as a form of experience that creates an active engagement with oneself, and the others, in addition to the contemporary affect theory that is rooted in Gilles Deleuze's concept of affect will lead us to see how *affects* grow in the area of performance art, and how aesthetic experience is constituted in and reinforces this affective engagement.

**Keywords:** Aesthetic Experience, Marina Abramović, Affect, Performance Art

## ÖZET

### PERFORMANS SANATINDA ESTETİK DENEYİM: MARINA ABRAMOVIĆ THE ARTIST IS PRESENT

Kırmızı, Defne

Yüksek Lisans, İletişim ve Tasarım Bölümü

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Bu tez performans sanatının bedensel ve dönüştürücü bir estetik deneyim yaratabilme olasılığını araştırmaktadır. Performans sanatı alanındaki köklü değişimlere tanıklık etmiş ve katkıda bulunmuş olan Marina Abramovic'in sanat pratiği, sanatın geçirdiği edimsel ve duygulanımsal dönüşüm bağlamında incelenecektir. Abramovic'in sanat işleri üzerine yapılmış akademik çalışmalara genel bir bakış sunulmasının yanı sıra, sanatçının 2010 yılında gerçekleştirdiği son performansı The Artist Is Present (Sanatçı Burada) ve performansın alımlaması, çağdaş performans sanatı alanında duygulanımsal bir çarpışmanın kapılarını açan estetik deneyim çerçevesinde tartışılacaktır. John Dewey'in sanata kişinin kendisiyle ve çevresiyle etkin bir deneyim biçimi olarak yaklaşımı, Gilles Deleuze'un duygulanım terimini kavramsallaştırmasına dayanan çağdaş duygulanım kuramı ile birlikte, bizi duygulanımların performans sanatında nasıl görünür olduğunu ve estetik deneyimin bu duygulanımsal bağlılığı nasıl kurduğunu ve pekiştirdiği sorularını keşfetmeye yöneltecektir.

**Anahtar Kelimeler:** Estetik Deneyim, Marina Abramović, Duygulanım, Performans Sanatı

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## CHAPTER 1

### INTRODUCTION

The biological and automatic system behind the production of tears has been explained by positive sciences. Although the “how” side of the tears’ existence is explained, the questions of “why”, “where” and “when” are still a mystery. On various occasions people may burst into a stream of tears or they may shed a single teardrop. The variety of these situations feed our curiosity about the incidents that trigger the irrepressible weeping. Some examples of artworks that lead the spectators into tears may be recounted within the history of tears. One of the most iconic examples of this incident is *Rothko’s Chapel* (1971), where an artwork literally turned into a place of worship and a meditative and sacred space. One of the most recent artworks that functions as a tear catalyst is Marina Abramović’s *The Artist is Present* (2010), where she made thousands of people cry<sup>1</sup> by doing almost nothing but sharing a reciprocal and silent gaze with the participants. Marina Abramović has been one of the most important

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<sup>1</sup> The pictures of people in tears, captured during their visit to *The Artist is Present*, are collected in a web blog called “Marina Abramovic Made Me Cry”. Extensive amount of visual documentation is available in the official website of Museum of Modern Art, New York (MoMA).

figures in the Performance Art with her unique and miscellaneous ways of embedding her and the spectators' body into the performance, and creating affective transmission.

Throughout this thesis, Abramović's artistic practice in conjunction with *the performative turn* and *the affective turn* will be explored. Through specifically focusing on *The Artist Is Present*, the affective elements in constructing the aesthetic experience in the contemporary performance art sphere will be revealed. While presenting a comprehensive overview of the former academic works done on Abramović's body of work, I will examine how seeing those works through affect studies perspective transform our understanding of Abramović's art. This exploration will lead us to examine the way *affects* grow in the area of performance art and how aesthetic experience is constituted in and reinforces this affective engagement.

Chapter 2 will present a conceptual framework on Abramović's destructive performance art career and provide a broad historical and theoretical background. Abramović's performance history is devoted to the exploration of different ways of manifesting her presence. Since the early years of her artistic exploration, Abramović has turned her body into a site of fearless and open plane, thus making her body the major object/subject for her performances. Starting with her early solo performances in the 1960s, she has been testing the limits of her body and her psyche to prove the limitlessness of the both elements. The artists' early years are portrayed with wound, blood and sweat. Abramović has used pain as an element of transcendence. Through pain she attempts to reach another level of consciousness while also sharing an adventurous journey for the spectators to communicate with the work that is created.

Starting with her twelve years long collaboration and relationship with Frank Uwe Laysiepen (Ulay), Abramović's performances gained a still, tranquil and ritualistic tone in contrast to her explicitly violent, self-destructive and provocative early work. As years passed, Abramović's durational pieces, due to the effect of her collaboration with Ulay, began to be less about the artist's and spectator's body and more about the spiritual exchange between *bodies*. The violent scene of her earlier works, which involved knives, a gun, a sharp arrow or broken glasses, evolved into a tamer hazard. Whether she engages with extremely vicious activities or contemplative ones, whether she engages in enduring painful acts or in ritualistic performances, her physical, mental and psychic presence, and the flourishing dialogue with the spectators are always at the center of her art.

The milestones in Abramović's career are parallel to the changes and developments in the general performance art scene. During the transformation that started in the 1950s with Jackson Pollock and John Cage and has continued in the 1960s with Joseph Beuys, the emphasis shifted to the creation process of the work and the experience of its reception, which assigned a new meaning to art. Artist's body as a medium or as an art instrument, instead of being a representation, became the focus during this period. The use of the body in performance entailed a radical transformation of the relationship between the artist, the work and the audience, and this transformation changed the production and reception processes. Throughout Chapter 3 the detailed background on Abramović's art will be presented to illuminate her contribution to performance art and her influence on the *performative turn*, which also will be discussed in detail later in the chapter. Through understanding these, we

will gain an insight of what Abramović achieved in and for art and how different art periods and the progress in the art scene has changed since the 1960s.

In Chapter 3, the term *experience*, as one of the most recurring themes within the discourses on the Abramović's art will be explored. Abramović's art relentlessly exhibits the distinctive role of art in providing a powerful experience. The artist verbally and physically articulates that one of the major roles of performance art is shaping and transmitting an experience. Through living this experience, one's own communication with the artwork and the social environment has dramatically changed. This novel way of connecting with the artwork and the environment may also influence one's connection with own self. The transformative quality of an experience heightens the artwork's power to create, in Deleuzian terms, "percepts", "affects" and "sensations", which we will examine throughout Chapter 4.

I will mainly present the ideas of John Dewey and Victor Turner in order to understand how thinking about experience can help us to gain a refreshing perspective on art and its quality in providing aesthetic experience. Dewey's idea of art as the most intrinsic path to human experience is parallel to Abramović's stance on art and her ambition to blur the boundaries between art and life. Dewey, in his canonical book *Art as Experience* (2005) claimed that an art object is defined by what that physical object does within the experience. Dewey stated that the gateway to enjoy aesthetic experience is focusing on the aesthetics in mundane and raw experiences, so that everyday experiences and aesthetic experiences mutually nourish each other. Dewey finds the roots of aesthetic experience in the sub-human animal life. Animals' ability to be here-and-now with their active senses and the way they compose past and future in the



present is a form of experience that generates active engagement with the world. Self and world, human and animal meld into each other. For Dewey, this type of experience is the beginning of art Gilles Deleuze, whose ideas we will heavily rely on later in this thesis, also referred to the correlation between the simple animal life and art, and sought to find the roots of art in it. In order to illustrate the pure state of art, Dewey articulated that art begins with animals; as they start to build a territory, the sensory qualities of living rise and simultaneously art emerges. Turner's perspective on experience is rooted in Dewey's ideas on art. He addresses the social function of individual aesthetic experience. For Turner (1986: 12), experience gains value through collective sharing and it intensifies the present moment that is shared between people and their environment. He emphasizes how experience is expressed through senses and individual reactions, and the way they resonate and are formed in the social sphere. Turner's dissection of the term helps us to have a more comprehensive understanding of how experience works, especially when evaluated within the context of Dewey's philosophy.

In order to gain a critical perspective on Abramović's performances, performance's function in critical theory, its wide range of use and role in transmitting social knowledge should be interrogated. In Chapter 3 the terms *performance* and *performativity* will also be introduced as instruments that transform meaning making processes. *Performance* comprises various activities and it transforms the significance of these events and attributes a cultural connotation to even a smallest act. Performance has a hybrid and multi-layered quality, thus it is very hard to have a singular or strict definition of the term. Rather I will rely on the polygonal approach of the Performance Studies to performance as an active and moving space, where meanings and sensations

are created and fluctuated. Through Performance Studies' perspective, the emergence of the performance as a dynamic art form and its capacity to embrace and merge different art mediums will be explored throughout the chapter.

*The Artist Is Present* is comprised of little fragments of the performances from Abramović's past works and surpasses them with its bold statement about presence and a shared experience. In Chapter 4, this shared experience will be explained through the term *affect*. The history of critical thought that includes the 20<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> centuries, proceeds by defining the different school of thoughts: structuralism, post-structuralism and deconstruction, new materialism, neo-formalism, new historicism, and "turns": the linguistic turn, the ethical turn, the religious turn, the ontological turn, the spatial turn, the rhetorical turn, the medial turn, and the affective turn (Abel 2008). *Affective turn*, especially within the last two decades, has been primary in theoretical debates and accepted as a paradigm shift across the humanities and cultural theory (Blackman and Cromby, 2007: 6). The term exists in a multidisciplinary context including feminist theory, queer theory, philosophy, political theory, cultural studies, psychology, biology and neuroscience.<sup>2</sup> *Affect* functions differently from the already available critical toolbox for analysing literature, film, visual arts or the social. It constructs a new ontological basis and directly impacts the way we get involved with theory and criticism. The main concern here is not really answering "what affect means but what it does" (Thomson and Biddle, 6). In Chapter 4, we will go through the possibilities that

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<sup>2</sup> Marina Abramović is seeking the answers for gaining a precise perspective on the sensational reaction that *The Artist Is Present* received. She used the electroencephalography (EEG) technique to measure her brain's electrical activity. As a part of her ongoing project *Marina Abramović: The Preservation of Performance Art* (MAI), the artist devotes significant amount of attention to what can neuroscience can potentially reveal about the affective encounter.

arise by using affect, while looking into *The Artist Is Present*. The productive dialogue between Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari, will guide us through understanding how affect resonates in the contemporary critical theory. The current theoretical texts that are devoted to exploring the transformative force of affect will be used to elucidate the affective transmission in the Abramović's performance.

In the conclusion, we will observe the accumulation of our thoughts on Abramović's performance art in junction with the force of affect, resulted in the transformation of our perception on *The Artist Is Present*. Abramović's stance on aesthetic experience and its resonating power within the affect theory will provide a fresh perspective on examining the artist's presence and the sensational reaction that the exhibition created. We will explore the possibility of the realizing "the affective encounter" through the aesthetic experience that the art viewers actively create and are engaged in an authentic way. Abramović's active role in the performance art, specifically her latest performance *The Artist Is Presence*, will guide us through this exploration. In the light of this knowledge, the active and open ways to communicate with art and to establish an aesthetic experience in the reception process, after the *performative turn* and the *affective turn* will be realized.

## **CHAPTER 2**

### **FORCES OF THE RAW: EXPERIENCE AND PERFORMANCE**

#### **2.1 What Can Experience Tell Us?**

Starting from the 1960s Abramović has been inviting spectators to directly communicate with her body gestures and primary actions throughout her performances. This sense of integration and exchange is one of the preliminary criteria of Abramović's artistic stance. Here, communication cannot be simply explained or equated with interactivity, active gaze or physical presence. Rather communication creates collective sharing; it widens what is usually seen as isolated and singular. It is the process of heightening spectators' involvement and of the transmission of meanings between the ones who are involved in this process. One of the major achievements of this process is to give body and definiteness to the experience of the one who actualizes as well as the one who witnesses (Dewey, 2005: 253). Art is one of the most effective modes of communication that exists. Following from this argument the presence of the common forces in conscious experience is an effect of the

existence of art and its openness to aesthetic communication (Dewey, 2005: 298). In Abramović's art, specifically in her performances, communication demands active creation of one's own unique experience. *Experience* is one of the most recurring themes in Abramović's performances and the academic works and art criticism that were devoted to examine her art (Fischer-Lichte, 2008: 7).

The artist's own individual experience becomes invisible through being synthesized with the audience's experiences, and is transformed into a collective experience (Demaria, 2004: 296). Although experience is considered a personal matter at a first glance, through interpreting individuals' expressions, which are representations, objectifications, texts or performances, experience transcends the closed environment. In other words, "expressions are the encapsulations of the experiences of others, they are the crystallized secretions of one's living human experience" (Turner and Bruner, 1986: 5). Expressions are the articulations of one's idiosyncratic formulations and representations of their own experiences. Experiences are nourished by expression and communication with others. We exceed the limits of individual experiences through participation of cultural and collective expressions. Both expressions and experiences are composed of little segments that have their own dynamics (Turner and Bruner, 1986:10). Victor Turner (1986: 6), in *Anthropology of Experience*, made a distinction between mere "experience" and "an experience": mere experience addresses to the consciousness and is an individual or personal experience, and has a temporal flow, whereas the latter is "the intersubjective articulation of experience" that is transformed into an expression. Abramović's performances attempted to provoke *an experience*.

Abramović's performances' emphasize on the live presence is maintained by the

phenomenon of experience, which is itself “lived and articulated by the duration of action and perception” (Demaria, 2004: 304). Her close connection with “real life experiences” is also highlighted in the discourses on Abramović’s art; her artistic experience is seen to be closely associated with ordinary experience (Stankovic, 2009: 567). In addition, there is a question of traumatic experience within the context of Abramović’s early performances. The discussion about visual representation of trauma in Abramović’s performances is an issue of experience, embodiment and spectators. Spectators’ and artists’ engagement with the body in this field of performance art is considered a mode of experience as well as a means of expression. Viewing performance is considered an embodied experience and through this embodied and experiential experience, performance has a potential to recreate the effect of a collective trauma’s presence (Duggan, 2007: 56). The embodied experience in performances also attracts spectators’ attention to embodiment as a cultural and political force (Oliver, 2010: 120).

Moreover, the discussion on spectators’ experiences of Abramović’s performance art brings the performative act of seeing into focus. An embedded and embodied mode of seeing is one of the major characteristics of audiences’ experiences in many of her performance art pieces (Oliver 2010: 120). The unique place of experience in performance art among the other time-based arts, were explored in several academic studies (Jones 1997: 11). They emphasized the authentic experience that is created by the ephemeral performance and how that experience is transformed into a new model of experience recreated for and with memory (Santone, 2008: 151). Marina Abramović herself also, centralizes ‘experience’ within her understanding of performance and artistic practice: “For me, the most important thing is experience. Transformation only

matters if you really go through something yourself” (Kaplan, 1999: 8).

Although the term is used extensively for analyzing the artists’ body of work, it lacks a coherent interpretation. Having a comprehensive understanding on this particular term helps us to shed light on previous academic writings that explore this major concept behind the artist’s works as well as Abramović’s own conception of experience. Furthermore, gaining a wider perspective on experience help us understand the general academic work in performance studies area that touch upon Abramović’s works. Specifically, the main reason lies beneath my intention in bringing the term to the surface and clarifying it, is experience's significance in defining *The Artist Is Present*.<sup>3</sup> Since understanding the sensation that the performance created and the way that participants embrace the unique interaction between themselves and the artist is in the scope of my thesis, it is crucial to have a unified interpretation of experience, as it is one of the major elements that created this ineffable connection. There are two main parameters in Abramović’s simple contract that she foresees for the visitors: time and experience. She explicitly said that “if you give time I give you experience” while she was showing her admiration for long durational arts<sup>4</sup> (Balzer, 2013). In *The Artist Is Present* participants' and spectators' unique experiences are defining the artwork and heighten its power to affect individuals as well as the masses. Therefore I will focus on the term in a more comprehensive way and apply it to understand the performance

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<sup>3</sup> The detailed explanation on the performance is available on page: 64-68

<sup>4</sup> *The Artist Is Present* is not the only artwork that forces the limits of the long-durational art. Abramović always refer to the other well recognized long-durational pieces in the art history: John Cage (2001-2640) Organ2/ASLSP (As Slow As Possible) (639 Years), Monte Young (1964-1973-1981) The Well-Tuned Piano (6 Hours), John Lennon and Yoko Ono (1969) Bed-In (7 Days), Christian Marclay (2010) The Clock (24 Hours), Douglas Gordon (1993) 24 Hour Psycho (24 Hours), Tenching Hsieh (1980-81) One Year Performance (1 Year),Richard Wagner (1848-1874) Der Ring des Nibelungen (15 Hours).

better.

In this section of my thesis, I aim to shatter the ineffability of the art experience and elucidate the term later to use it within the context of Abramović's performance history. In this respect, John Dewey's writings on how experience is resonated in art would enrich our perspective on the way art and experience merge into each other. *Art as Experience* (1934) is regarded as one of the most canonical books of the 20<sup>th</sup> century on this topic. In *Art as Experience*, Dewey's major political and philosophic ideas are discussed within the context of aesthetics, art and culture as well as their role in establishing a robust society. Although the issues discussed are varied, the core element in his thinking is *experience* and its evolution in art. For Dewey, art is a unique form of experience that has a significant potential in shaping individuals and societies. Dewey (2005: 138) articulated that experience is core to the power of performance: "Whatever path the work of art pursues, it, just because it is a full and intense experience, keeps alive the power to experience the common world in its fullness."

Among many others that have been influenced by Dewey's ideas, Jeff Kelley (2003) and Joyce Brodsky (2002) specifically reflected Dewey's thoughts to understand Body Art and Performance Art. Both authors articulated that Dewey's judgments on the relationship between art and experience are big sources of inspiration for art that uses body as a major medium. John Dewey's philosophical stance sees intelligence in strong connection with human needs and social circumstances that are derived from mundane, daily life situations. In Kelley's introduction to "Essays on the Blurring Art and Life" by Allan Kaprow, one of the first performance artists of the postwar period



and the pioneers of Happenings, Dewey's understanding of art and aesthetics was explored. Starting with 1949, Kaprow's artistic practice and notion of art have become strongly based on Dewey's integration of art and life, in "Art as Experience". Kaprow defined modernist practice of art not just with the final art product but also with the artists' active involvement in the processes of living and art making. Art is grounded in the common experience and outside of predefined, framed, intensified understanding of artistic experience. Dewey and Kaprow introduced the possibility of merging the flux of living with the aesthetic experience. They illustrate experience as an organic form that has its own natural and social forms, shapes, beginnings, ends, patterns, plots and meanings, so it could gain aesthetic qualities (Kelley, 2003: xiv-xvii). Experience is always aesthetic, it is active and thoughtful, it is intellectual and sensual; it arises where criticism and philosophy also can take place (Noë, 2012: 129-131). For Dewey, aesthetic experience is a path for us to connect with nature and the world; there is an intrinsic connection between experience and both natural and social aesthetic form (Brodsky, 2002: 104). Dewey (2005: 22) emphasized this strong bond between experience and the social:

Experience is the result, the sign, and the reward of that interaction of organism and environment which, when it is carried to the full, is a transformation of interaction into participation and communication. Since sense-organs with their connected motor apparatus are the means of this participation, any and every derogation of them, whether practical or theoretical, is at once effect and cause of a narrowed and dulled life-experience.

Both making and perceiving art are "lived experiences" and allow us gaining a novel perception about practices that we usually accept as ordinary. Lived experiences as thoughts and desires, as verbal and visual texts, are the primary reality (Turner and Bruner, 1986: 5). They create a new level of concentration and awareness about

habitual, daily activities, and through those skills we gain an ability to appreciate those little details. This transformation of perception also changes the artwork itself and creates a dialogue between spectators' lived body and embodied work. In *Art as Experience* (2005), Dewey pointed out several issues about aesthetic unities and formal structures in art that might be obsolete, however, his insights about experience and experiencing artworks are still valid and invaluable (Brodsky, 2002: 103-108).

Dewey urged to include human experience into art's fundamental defining parameters. For Dewey (2005:1), art cannot be equated with the final material product rather, art object becomes complete with what it does with and in the experience. *The Artist is Present* breaks the conventional status of an art product, which only existed physically and externally and was inaccessible to human conditions, and generated art that has close ties to human experience, actual life-experiences. Art functions as a bridge between the refined and intensified forms of experience in, which the works of art and the everyday events are accepted as an instrument to constitute experience. For capturing the meaning of an artistic product, we have to surpass its object value and physical quality and focus on mundane forces of experience the things we do not usually consider as aesthetic. Dewey articulated that: "Everything that intensifies the sense of an immediate living is an object of intense admiration." In Dewey's aesthetic the line between art and life is blurred; the origin of experience is established by the principal conditions of life (Dewey, 2005:12). He stated that a work of art is a celebration and recognition of an ordinary experience. This portraiture of simple experience gives a clue about aesthetic experience and has a place in it (Turner and Bruner, 1986: 34). Dewey's perception on art is parallel to the way *The Artist Is Present* resonates through individuals and art world. Not only by merging everyday

events and aesthetic experience, but also by emphasizing how an art object owes its richness to the present moment. Dewey articulated the need for being rooted in the present in order to being fully alive and to reach aesthetic experience in the best possible sense. Art celebrates the moments in which the past emphasizes the present and in which future is deeply nourished by what the present moment is, with peculiar intensity (Turner and Bruner, 1986: 17). The aesthetic quality in one's experiences that life acquires and circulates, is proceed from the life's own organic rhythm with its movements and climaxes, breaks and junctions. Aesthetic emerges from these flows; it is these phases and small units of movements and pauses. Because of its natural circulation, Dewey stated that aesthetics does not emerge from an ideal realm, where Platonic prototypes seen superior to the mundane human activities. Rather, aesthetics exists in the core of sensible and ordinary human experience (Turner and Bruner, 1986: 39). Art itself is a basic and vital human experience and all perceptual experience, viewed correctly, is a way to access the aesthetic experience (Noë, 2012: 128).

Dewey, just like the other pragmatists focused on the processual; he believes that meaning and experience are not prior to the event rather they emerge simultaneously with the present act. Human experience is not rooted in our capacity for thoughtful observation or understanding of the world and our position in it, but rather its basis is our "unthinking attunement" (Noë, 2012: 7). Thus, experience and meaning emerge effortlessly, unintentionally; without contemplating on the situation itself, experience leads to meaning. Experience and meaning happen in the present, the past is comprised of memories and future is filled with different expectations and possibilities. Experience reveals a meaning where the past and the present merged.

Meaning exists within the experience; it is contained within the continuous flow of experience and makes connections between experiences that belong to different time intervals and happen in different contexts (Turner and Bruner, 1986: 8). Noë (2012: 127) claimed that the power of aesthetic experience is rooted in its capacity to generate meaning:

The pleasure of aesthetic experience is the pleasure of getting it. It is the pleasure of understanding, of seeing connections, of comfortably knowing one's way about. It is the pleasure that comes from recognizing the purposiveness, or integrity (as Dewey put it), or meaning, of the work. This meaning or purposiveness was there all along but hidden in plain sight.

Abramović relentlessly pursued her fascination for exploring states of presence (Birringer, 2003: 66). The artist turned herself into a site of presence; she seeks to achieve for both herself and public's total presence. This type of presence requires complete attentiveness, bodily, affective and sensual engagement, unification of artist's and audience's body into one body, which intensifies the performance, flows and circulates the contact (Bernstein, 2005). Performance art is the experience of heightened vitality, it strengthens connection and communication with the world and "at its height it signifies complete interpenetration of self and the world of objects and events" (Dewey, 2005: 18). When such type of ecstatic state is realized in the performance what occurs is "a brief ecstatic state and sense of union (often lasting only a few seconds), which may often be described as no more than a shiver running down at the back at a certain point" (Turner and Bruner, 1986: 43).

Experience involves all kinds of realizations of a living organism and even its most primitive forms, it involves a faith for an ineffable perception which is itself an aesthetic experience (Dewey, 2005: 19). In order to emphasize the rawness of the

aesthetic experience, Dewey portrayed an artist as an animal and refers to animal life as an exemplary for the unity of experience. For Dewey (2005: 18), art is the best proof that a living organism can consciously restore the union of sensation, needs and actions originally found in animal life:

The live animal is fully present, all there, in all of its actions: in its wary glances, its sharp sniffings, its abrupt cocking of ears. All senses are equally on the *qui vive*. As you watch, you see motion merging into sense and sense into motion – constituting that animal grace so hard for man to rival.

Dewey's praise on animals' ability to synthesize past and future in the present and to create immediate, hybrid and vital sensations could be seen in *The Artist Is Present*. Abramović's motionless yet moving act, shows resemblance with the primitive existence of animals. She sat still, directly looked into the participants' eyes and intensified the presence of her body, the performance and the contact with the spectators. She grasped the sources of the collective experience in the performance from this primitive, pure act of looking and being present. She was transformed into a live, vigorous and tranquil animal that fed by the interaction of man and nature, which is the source of direct experience. Through this interaction and the rhythmic elements of want and fulfillment, flows of being active, and being withheld within this interaction, different senses are united, human energy is gathered, released, transformed, freed and realized (Dewey, 2005: 15). Thanks to this interaction, experience occurs continuously; since a living organism always communicates with its environment and experience is tied to the natural process of living, it arises constantly (Dewey, 2005: 36). Aesthetic experience has a dynamic form that allows growth and movement: "Experience is not something that happens in us. It is something we do. Experience itself as a kind of dance – a dynamic involvement and engagement with the world around us" (Noë 2012: 130). Its rhythm has a circulation, which has pauses

in it, and even at the consummation phase we cannot talk about a destination or an end point. Each phase of the act of experience forms a whole in itself. Experience exists as a unity; because of the continuous flow from a state of being into another, there are no holes, fixed connections or definitive centers. Instead, experience embraces pauses, places of rest and breath where one finds a place to seize pace and movement (Dewey 2005: 38).

Experience's moving quality, its nature and transmission can only be explained and experienced by art. In art, there is no other way to transmit experience, rather than being the experience itself; experience is inherited in art. In other words, art unites the very same relation of doing and undergoing, outgoing and incoming energy that makes an experience to be an experience. In the case of Abramović's performance, unified experience arises through uninterrupted gaze (Dewey 2005: 45-50). In a hurried human environment in which we live, it is nearly impossible to have an access to a deep and intense experience. This scattered form of experience fragments the definition of the experience as well as the action itself. Even though the dazzling, stage-like setting of the performance could be a barrier for a contemplative dialogue and active engagement, we can still seek a certain amount of content, resilience and serenity in *The Artist Is Present*. Participants are forced to think more about duration, to focus on the present moment and reach an experience that has a dense pattern and a multi-dimensional structure.

Dewey specified the definition of the *work of art* and separated it from the art product, which also provides a transparent understanding on the role of experience in art. The art product, for Dewey, is physical and potential; the work of art is active and

experienced (Dewey 2005: 168). The work of art involves a complex interaction that embraces thoughts and sensations; it reveals energies, impulses and tensions that are directly tied to that interaction. In a work of art, the connection of intensities, energies and tensions are beyond verbal expression (Dewey 2005: 186). Through its emphasis on interaction, the progressive, active role that it contains, the energies and sensations that it reveals and lastly the experience that it provides, *The Artist Is Present* can be evaluated within the frame of a work of art. The energy that is released in the performance is used to conceptualize the artwork that is not intelligible through other forms of discussion. Performances power to move and stir, to calm and tranquilize is examined within the rhythm, balance and organization of energies. The term energy has been used several times within the discussion of experience by Dewey as well as within the context of Abramović's performances. Dewey (2005: 185) presented two alternatives for a work of art in terms of what art does to and for us: "Either it operates because some transcendent essence descends upon experience from without, or aesthetic effect is due to art's unique transcription of the energy of the things of the world". Another criteria for the transformation of art product into a work of art is the artist's capability to live fully while producing it. When we look back at *The Artist Is Present*, there is a possibility to observe those ways to experience the event, or the performance. The performance gains value by following these forces that allow experience to gain significance and value. In other words, rhythms and organization of energies are significant for the realization of the artists' and spectators' experiences.

In understanding how *experience* operates in a work of art, the medium of the artwork has a significant role Dewey (2005: 203). stated that: "In every experience, we touch

the world through a particular tentacle; we carry on our intercourse with it, it comes home to us, through a specialized organ.” He highlighted the synesthetic tone of experience: although we communicate with one major sensory apparatus, other resources of perception also incorporate with that activity. In other words, while we see, we also hear, touch or feel. In terms of the performance art, the body or the artist’s presence becomes the medium itself, which carries the qualities of movement, sound, visual perception, touch so on and so forth. Through this hybrid sense of communication, the medium’s power of expressiveness and energy are enhanced. In *The Artist Is Present* Marina Abramović’s body or more truly, presence, works as a catalyst to arouse different senses in the spectators. The performance operates to deepen and to clarify the sense of embracing a vast whole can be associated with every mundane experience. Through the evoked senses during the act of performance, this whole then becomes to be felt as an expansion of our senses and us (Dewey 2005: 203). Every medium has its own power, active and passive, outgoing and receptive, and that the basis for distinguishing the different qualities of arts is their use of the energy, the characteristic of the material used as a medium.

Experience does not exist without a human force. A living organism’s interaction with its human and physical environment shapes the matter of experience. In defining what actually happens within the every experience, the human contribution is the major, fundamental factor. Experience is composed by the interaction between subject and object, self and the world, and it cannot be classified or explained simply as physical or mental activity. The immediate experience is visceral, not cerebral and not interpretable in psychological or historical ways. Experience emerges in the synthesis of inner and outer factors, which are very incorporated until one gets lost in the other.



In other words, in aesthetic experience, there is no distinction between self and object; organism and environment coincides to constitute experience in which the internal and the external are fully integrated in each other that each disappears (Dewey 2005: 255-259). We respond to art considering its connection with cultural and natural experience. As Dewey (2005: 282) stated that art arises in the midst of that integration of life and a living organism:

Art is the extension of the power of rites and ceremonies to unite men, through a shared celebration, to all incidents and scenes of life. This office is the reward and seal of art. That art weds man and nature is a familiar fact. Art also renders men aware of their union with one another in origin and destiny.

Even though, the phenomenon seems directly or remotely connected to the internal or mental systems, in an experience, things and events belonging to the world, physical and social, are transformed through the human context they exist, while the living creature is changed and developed through its interaction with things originally external to it (Dewey 2005: 258). A work of art is a phenomenon that is comprised of heightened and intensified experiences. Experience does not lead to another metaphysical realm instead, it gives birth to new experiences. The sense we have for essential characteristics of persons and objects, reveals that they are very largely the result of art, while the theory that is under discussion embraces the idea that art depends upon and refers to essences already exists in being, thus reversing the actual process. If we are now aware of essential meanings, it is mainly because artists in all the various arts, in this case specifically the artworks that embody performative elements, have extracted and expressed them in vivid and salient subject matter of perception.

Art had been considered an impersonal matter, dealing with the universal segments of the experienced world. Since the early 20<sup>th</sup> century art, the role of individual's

experience had been highly dominant. Through Dewey's perspective, art conveys the process of producing something out of a physical material that can be perceived by our senses, where *aesthetic* denotes the act of experience, which can be both appreciative and perceptive. Aesthetic understanding, as a criterion of art has a potential to be transformed and universalized with the presence of experience. The emphasis of experience in the conception of art creates a universal language to appreciate different art forms. In art as an experience, the subject is neither universal nor individual, neither subjective nor objective, neither sensuous nor rational. Dewey (2005:306) emphasized this broad approach to experience by saying:

In art as an experience, actuality and possibility, or ideality, the new and old, objective material and personal response, the individual and universal, surface and depth, sense and meaning, are integrated in an experience in which they all transfigured from the significance that belongs to them when isolated in reflection.

The hybrid quality of experience that is presented throughout this chapter and aesthetic experience's connection to the vital human roots, its' tactile form, dependency on the raw living experiences and the strong ability to pull the spectators into the performance in an intensive way will help us understand Abramović's insistence on inviting spectators to the center of the performance and somehow force them to create their own unique experiences.

## **2.2 Performance as a Critical Inquiry**

Performance functions as an act of transferring social knowledge, memory and sense of identity. Performance plays with the idea of identity, of body and of time. The major issues that performance addresses have changed significantly from authority to

affect, from text to body, from artistic gesture to spectators' authentic reactions and freedom to transform and make meanings. The issues of subjectivity, space, audience, commodification, conventions, politics, which are originally questioned in the authentic context of theatre or other type of visual performance arts, are now reconsidered with the rise of the performance art. Performance Studies establishes an analysis on various practices and events, which involve theatrical, rehearsed or conventional events such as dance, theatre, rituals, political meetings and funerals. Moreover, it provides a methodological perspective that allows critics to examine general events as performance. Public protests, resistances, citizenship, ethnicity, sexual identity and social identity are some of the main things that are both collectively and individually performed daily in the public sphere. Categorizing these behaviors or matters as performances assigns a role to performance as an initiator of a novel ways of knowing. Performance Studies, as an embodied practice alongside of the other cultural discourses, provides a way to analyze performances and aesthetics of everyday life. This particular discipline transgresses boundaries, builds a bridge between various disciplines and exhibits unexpected association (Phelan and Lane, 1998: 361).

Performances exist in a circular system; one influences and transforms the other. In this respect, performances are always active and in progress and, they are intelligible and available for conceptualization within the context of current environment and issues around them. In Performance Studies, the meaning and function of performance vary widely. Peggy Phelan, who has significant contributions to the Performance Studies field, accentuated the performance's continuing power. Jones strictly defines performance's life span within the limits of the present. For

performance is the only art form that guarantees artist's presence (Jones, 1997: 13). Phelan (1993: 146) explicitly stated that the art forms' ephemerality is the major quality for performance:

Performance cannot be saved, recorded, documented, or otherwise participate in the circulation of representations of representation. Performance's being, like the ontology of subjectivity proposed here, becomes itself through disappearance.

Performance drifts between present and past, presence and absence, consciousness and memory. The traces of the now absent performances are found in the present performances. In that way, performance contains the lingering presence of past performances; it embraces the traces of other performances and produces experiences. There are several studies that are devoted to explore the performance's haunting capacity with collective memory and history, and the way they contribute to the continuum and transmission of social knowledge, there are vast amount of studies that focus on the performances.

The term "performance" gave rise to another concepts as "performative" and "performativity."<sup>5</sup> Performance Studies compares and contrasts the terms performance and performativity. It highlights the merging points, overlaps, certain distinctions these two concepts and both distinguishes and connects them.<sup>6</sup> These terms are used interchangeably and may lead to some confusion but still, the multi-

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<sup>5</sup> Jacques Derrida's *event of a speech* theory would provide a broad understanding on the terms. Judith Butler's approach to performativity as the process of socialization, where gender and sexuality identities are produced through social practices would gives an idea on the role of performativity in the social. Following these see also J. L. Austin's point of view on the performative side of language that works as a cultural agency and is diffused into normative discursive practices.

<sup>6</sup> For the broad discussion on the performativity and the principle of its function in a social sphere: Phelan and Lane (1998) and Fischer-Lichte (2008).

layered quality of performance deepens the connections between different intelligible and productive systems. Although different uses of the term in political, scientific, academic areas or in business matters rarely coincide, we cannot talk about a universal or transparent concept that directly defines performance. This untranslatability of the term makes the concept and the practices theoretically enabling and culturally revealing. Performance, in its broadest sense, may not provide an access and insight into another culture, but they certainly reveal the politics of our interpretations and thinking mechanisms (Taylor, 2003: 19).

Since the end of the 1960s performance gained a novel appreciation, apart from traditional performing arts as dance and theatre, it started to describe a wide range of cultural activity and became a frequently used concept within the postmodernism debates (Diamond, 1996: 12). In the early 1960s, art scene witnessed a *performative turn*, which not only made every art form performative but also led to an emergence of a new genre of art, as performance art. The boundaries between the art forms became increasingly fluid; music, literature, theatre, mainly the creative process are intended to be realized in and as performance. Art's focus in general was shifted to create art events rather than art objects. In other words, artistic experience's emphasis has shifted from an art object to an art event that involves the spectators as much as the artist, from the stable work to the dynamic process of making art (Fischer-Lichte, 2008: 7-18). In artistic experience what is now important is not the act of looking to the art object and gaining a renewing perspective about the art object. Rather, the situation in which the spectators have an experience through the performance leads to a profound, comprehensive and refreshed understanding on one's own situation of being in the world. Therefore, the relationship between the

material and semiotic status of the instruments used in performance and their function in the performance have changed. In this form of artistic experience, the material status of the object cannot be equated with the signifier status; objects and actions are not dependent on the meanings attributed to them. Performance acknowledges the possibility for all participants to experience a transformation, a metamorphosis (Fischer-Lichte, 2008: 22-23). As a consequence of the small yet profound moments in the performance that raise awareness and create deeper insight about the shared process of being in the world, spectators are lifted to the state of being present.<sup>7</sup> Performance intensifies the insignificant moments in the life and made them “emotionally voluminous, generous, aesthetically striking and intersubjectively intense” (Dolan, 2005: 5).

Following the developments in the approach to the concept of performance as a ubiquitous term, performance started to be considered an aesthetic genre and seen different from happenings or mixed media works. With the growing interest to the performance art, art theorists began to draw flexible yet defining boundaries to the content and definition of performance art. The time-based, non-static and intermedia art reflects only one side of what actually performance art is; within the performance art so many art forms are merged, thus it is nearly impossible to draw strict lines for performance art. As a result of this dynamic interaction between the performance structure, the media, the artist and the viewer, a performance artist becomes a revolutionary pioneer, who has a limitless potential to widen performance art’s boundaries, test its limits and research its impossibilities and takes these inquiries as

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<sup>7</sup> Jill Dolan (2005: 6-10) defines these moments with the term “utopian performatives”, which Dolan believes, present epiphanies, generates moments that roots us into the present and affective vision of our connection with the world.

a challenge (Burnham, 1986: 15). The untranslatability or indefinability of the term illustrates the field of performance studies. During the 1960s, the term performance extends its limits from performing arts to a wide range of cultural activity. In the 1970s, Performance Studies builds a bridge between anthropology and theatre by examining social dramas, liminality and enactment as an alternative path to the structuralist notion of normativity. Performance Studies grows out of various social disciplines and it introduces us the term *performance* not just as an object or practice but also as a theoretical concept. Rather than nourishing discursive thinking and focusing performance's content and product, Performance Studies celebrates the form and process. With its indefinability and complexity, performance conveys the idea of challenge and also self-challenge within it. The term denotes a process, praxis, a mode of transmission and an accomplishment, and covers a wide range of meanings in a way no other term could. Performance Studies is "interdisciplinary, intercultural and intergenic"; it has a fluid identity and it rejects a strict or a single definition (Phelan and Lane 1998: 360). Performance Studies is not interested in final forms, but it acknowledges performances' active and floating space, where meanings and sensations are engendered, interrupted and interpreted.

Despite the untranslatability of the term, experience is still a matter of critical inquiry; the ways the performance analyzed and described, and the relationship between the artist and the audience, are still the subjects discussed within the performance studies. Performance is a critical analysis of meaning and experience and it is a mere enactment of a text. Performance constitutes a unity between text and enactment, and cannot be reduced to one another (Turner and Bruner, 1986: 22). Starting in the 1970s, performance started to be discussed alongside the practices of

visual art and body art. Since performance is accepted as a form of spectacle, which includes all kinds of visual practices, especially theatre and dance, it directly develops a critical tradition that strongly affects the way many performance artist works (Demaria 2004; 296). The development in the conceptual art and performance art genres fundamentally change the rules of arts and the owner of the art. The power of a performance art work is measured with its openness to merge different art categories and dissolve the limits of an established art form. Through performance art, main communication codes in the visual arts were transformed in the presentation of the body; the body embodies the possibility for becoming both as an aesthetic and social sign that also commutes political power (Warr, 2000: 222-228). In the 1970s an artist's and spectator's body was central to the performance art, the artist was her own object and subject, and the mundane experiences or simple existence of the artist was materialized through performances. Since then, the need for knowledge or critical inquiry was not in the center of the performances, rather it has been used to witness one's own self.

Although, the mundane and everyday life acts are embedded in the performance, what makes us categorize them as performance or in other words the difference between the act of doing and performing is the way we think about these actions. The consciousness about these ordinary acts transforms the term and gives them the quality of a performance. Private setting of an artists' or spectators' life can be transformed into a material for performance, which are used to face, to test and to know, the need in itself. In performance, "everything can be recycled any action of any moment of any day" (Vergine, 2000: 15). This ascetic experience, which has its root in the historical avant-garde movements and the postwar period, has



dramatically changed not only in terms of the understanding of performance but also the production and perception of work of art. The performances of this period are now defined as dematerialized art forms. During the 1960s artists increasingly sought to break the distinction between art and life and started to make connections between them. Art has shifted its attention toward the social, economic and historical environment. With art's appreciation of the everyday acts and gestures and through this appropriation, art and art object began to be dematerialized. The body, movement and space have been highlighted within the creative process rather the artistic gestures (Warr, 2000: 298). With the effect of having a bodily presence, where its roots based on cabaret performances, dada exhibitions, or in other experimental movements of theatre and dance, performance raised the expressive qualities of the body:

Despite the individual arena that performance is realized, it has strong cultural connotations as well. Performance accentuates cultural and sub-cultural connections: As soon as performativity comes to rest on a performance, questions of embodiment, of social relations, of ideological interpellations, of emotional and political effects, all become discussable (Diamond, 1996: 5).

Since the early happenings and body art of the 1960s and 1970s, performance art has established a novel relationship between art and politics. Through its engagement with the body as an initiator of experience and it's ways of expression make the spectators, art critics and even people from outside of the art world see embodiment as a cultural and political force (Oliver, 2010: 120). Thanks to the performance's capacity to embrace cultural and ideological traces, it constitutes an important part of the collective, social memory. We consider performance art within the boundaries of contemporary art period, which is self-conscious, self-referential, reflexive and

preoccupied with simulations and theatricalizations in every aspect of its social awareness.

Performance is a form of deterritorialization and infinite becomings, it is comprised of conjunctions of the spectators and performers in where desires flow, connections shatter, a new set of junctions emerges (Bernstein, 2005). It delivers meaning directly through transformation. Performance by moving us, provoking us and challenging our way of perceiving our selves and our environment, transforms us. Performance escapes all illusions and representations; it brings emotional flow and symbolizes objects into a destabilized zone, the body, space into a fluid zone (Deleuze and Guattari 1982: 177). In performance art, body is not only used as an “expression, renaissance or revival; notwithstanding the estheticizing nostalgia for an impressive relationship with the real that it shows, it is anyways a critical process” (Vergine 2000; 12). As Berthold Brecht articulated (1964: 78) that sensorial experience and desires are not opposed to critical thinking. Spectators’ pleasures or displeasures are not limited by just being sensorial reactions; they also have an intellectual basis. Performance produces a cognitive experience and a knowledge, which not only serves to rationale but also creates a site that is sensual, perceived, felt and experienced. Experience is not only involved in structuring the thought but it shapes “the whole human vital repertoire of thinking, willing, desiring, and feeling, subtly and varyingly interpenetrates on many levels” (Turner and Bruner, 1986: 35). Therefore, performance has always been and will be open to critical appreciation and sensorial experience (Bernstein, 2005). This section of the thesis by no means aims to present a comprehensive overview of the views about *performance* or *performativity*. Rather, I have tried to highlight how performance art is located within the performance studies in order to strengthen the connection between these two courses.

Being familiar with the terms and their enduring power will affect the way we perceive Abramović's stance on performance as an open and dynamic form. In the following chapter, the theories about *performance* will be presented embedded in the discussion about Marina Abramović's body of performance art works.

## CHAPTER 3

### WHO IS (AFRAID OF) MARINA ABRAMOVIĆ?

#### 3.1 The Early Period: Unveiling the Artist Body

Marina Abramović, who is one of the performance artists, who pioneered the use of performance as a visual art form, was born into a catastrophic political environment in Yugoslavia. Abramović's early life period, specifically the years she spent in Yugoslavia, have been the subject of her art both in mediated and direct ways. There has always been a significant correlation between her life experiences and her performances, thus having an insight about her past will provide a deeper understanding of her works (Goldberg, 1995: 11-18). Her mother, Danica Abramović, who has a significant role in shaping Marina's confrontational performances, was involved in the activities of Yugoslavia's Partisan resistance fighters in the war. She had an active role in the Communist Party, became a partisan in 1941 and was the secretary of the Communist Committee for People's Health in the year of 1946, when she gave birth to the artist. Throughout her childhood years, she witnessed directly the effects of Second World War and to the traces of both of

her parents' major appearances in the social sphere. The art works that she made in those years convey the idea about rebellion in its broadest sense; "they are the revolt against the family structure as well as the state and the systems of art" (Abramović, 2007).<sup>8</sup> At the end of the 1960s Abramović started to "put life in art" starting with painting and then she shifted her focus to exploring performances power (Westcott, 2010: 40). Between the years of 1971 and 1972, she exhibited public performances in Belgrade, which were dominated by the idea of passivity in activity and also did installations and sound pieces. In 1973, she left Belgrade and the road to London was the beginning of a huge transformation in Abramović's art.<sup>9</sup> With her radical and provocative performance series called *Rhythm*, Abramović opened up a new passage for the realization of the use of performance as a transformative medium and her exploration of the use of body in brutal, provocative and open ways, as a major medium.

With the raise of Performance Art two major questions emerged about the artist's body: "Why was the artist's body largely veiled or repressed within Modernism to the extent that it could not be fully "seen" until the 1960s?" and "What happens to

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<sup>8</sup> Abramović continues to include the traumas from her past and her relation with her family even to her late performances: "*Balkan Baroque*, which earned Abramović the Leone d'Oro Prize at the Venice Biennale in 1997 (after a sustained controversy around its place of exhibition), also includes images of father, mother, and self projected behind a space in which are set three copper sinks that also look like coffins. The artist washes 1,500 large beef bones, piled into a mound, while singing folk songs from her childhood. These works of performative trial and endurance in annexing the historical and the biographical while still seeking a generalized symbolic mode of expression bring us to understand how fully the notion of a trial by fire, a ritual of submission and endurance, enters into Abramović's artistic practice." (Turim, 2003)

<sup>9</sup> The portrayal of political and social environment during Abramović's early years and the detailed background of the artist's early works are available in Abramović's biography, "When Abramović Dies" (2010) by James Westcott.

our conception of the artistic subject (the subject who creates) and of the subject in general when we begin to “see” that body after 1960?” (Warr 2000: 95). In modernist art history, rooted in Kantian aesthetic discourse, both the artist and the critic are portrayed as distant subjects; they remain transcendent rather than immanent or embodied subjects. This portrayal of a distant subject can be partially explained by the distant position of aesthetic in Kantian philosophy of aesthetic, which supports a disinterested form of aesthetic pleasure.<sup>10</sup> The performances of emerging artist in the 1960s enacted the dramatic social and cultural shifts that privileged post-modernist period. The veiled body that echoes modernist practices’ orders about meaning and value has become more and more open, dominant and aggressively surfaced with the rise of performance art during the 1960s. During this period the boundaries blurred between public and private, self and site, social and personal.<sup>11</sup> Frenzied, violent and excessive Body Art practices during the 1960s, focused on the exhibition of the self in its full embodiment and as a way of turning to be itself. The artist’s body has functioned as a kind of resistance to a social power in relation to the being itself within its performance, which is socially determining. The emergence or unveiling of the artist’s body in the 1960s can be viewed as a means of enacting and embedding the self within the social. Body exists as a site where public and private powers are expressed, and it also becomes the site of protests that resist Modernism’s repressive and restrictive logic. The body functioned as a signifying system within the 20<sup>th</sup> century’s flows of challenges and transformations. The belief that the body can

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<sup>10</sup> Kant’s distinction between beauty and aesthetic, and his philosophical stance that privileges a distant and disembodied ideal of aesthetic : Cohen D., and Guyer P. 1985. *Essays in Kant’s Aesthetics*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press.

<sup>11</sup> Phenomenological view of meaning and experience promotes the presence of intersubjectivity and embodied subject in the social, that integrates the social environment and the analysis of body art practices.

produce knowledge, which is not necessarily purely rational or empirical, arose at the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> century (Warr, 2000: 16-23).

Abramović's art has emerged parallel to the changes in the course of body art, the turn in perception toward and the appropriation of the body within the art context has shaped the artist's body of work. Recent art history witnessed a significant shift in the artist's use of and perception of the body, which has been used not simply as the content but also the platform and a path to access to another plane. Through the last hundred years, artists and art critics have been searching the ways to question the way the body has been depicted and the way it has been conceived. With the help of the body art and performance art, the temporality, contingency and instability of the body have been explored. Moreover, the notion of constructed identity, as opposed to an inherent quality, has been interrogated within and beyond social and cultural norms and limits. They have been explored the notion of consciousness and the ways to expressing the self that is invisible, ephemeral, formless and liminal (Warr, 2000: 11). These art forms' focus on risk, pain, fear, death and sexuality is not coincidental when the body has been threatened by these factors (Abramović et.al., 1998).

The artist's works deliver information directly through transformation considering the performance medium's separation from intermediary art mediums such as painting or sculpture (Jones, 1997: 13). In body art, artist's body is seen as a naked inscription and performance is turned to be an area of playful, productive and direct energy transformation between the artist and the spectator. Abramović's performances are accurate examples of this transmission, where meaning is re-expressed, reinvented and reproduced through the transformations of the relation

between time and space (Demeria, 2004: 295). The experience of time and space, definitive terms in defining performance's working principles, reflects the main concern behind most of the paradoxical pieces of the period, which is to engage both the viewer and artist directly in the work itself (Warr, 2000: 18). Abramović's focus on the artist's body and the public's body, is attached to her understanding of performance as a transformative instrument which not only have the power to change the individual experience but can function in a wider realm and transform the society's thinking mechanisms. The artist resists to pain, exhaustion and danger in the pursuit of the emotional and spiritual transformation (Birringer 2003: 68). This ritualistic tone of Abramović's work is consistent with the performance's very nature. Ritual is a complex compositional form, like performance, consists of sound or silence, body, elements of masochism and participation of spectators. Each element appropriates experience in its own unique way; each has different reflexive properties and in a complex ritualistic environment each mode becomes prominent at a particular time throughout the progress of performance (Turner and Bruner, 2001: 27).

### **3.2. Ephemerality of The Live Performance**

Abramović's art seeks to engage the viewer through the senses, inviting a mode of perception that does not privilege the visual. Her major aim is to arouse the spectators' whole body, their sensorium apparatus, in an artistic experience which is directly linked to the empirical or what is called real world, in which knowledge flows through the body (Bernstein, 2005). Widely known as confrontational, masochistic and endurance artist Marina Abramović has dramatically accentuated



artistic encounter and experimented with various forms of it throughout her performance art career. Artistic encounter in the context of Abramović's art is not drawn with strict lines, is not encapsulated between the artist and the audience, and the art object that is emerged from this encounter is not defined as a constant unchanging variable (Anderson, 2010: 106). Instead, Abramović's art grows from the disappearance of commodification, of the art object or the artistic medium. Both the art product and the body as a medium challenge the idea of preservability; there is almost nothing to be bought or sold, the work of art disappears without leaving physical traces behind. This phase of disappearance or ephemerality also gives birth to another level of durability to the performances; the live performances "dissolve with significance, with the personal and political resonance of alienation and connection, of abundance and abnegation, of subjectivity and objecthood." (Anderson, 2010, 102).

Abramović, despite the abundant ways of challenging the performance medium, has a very refined body of work. The artists' performances exist in the basis of the aesthetic, cultural and the political. Although the artist's performances are organized and executed as aesthetic productions they are not strictly tied to this background. The artworks that are both performances and performative acts, not only exist as embodied, aesthetic events, but also reveal the shifts in the cultural and political settings. Although Abramović insisted that she is not interested in politics, she accepts that her pieces have a political content (Abramović et al., 1998). Her performances show political resonance not in too obvious or a didactic style; the performances question the matter of consumption and the way the performances resist across commodification. In the artist's performances, the conventional

understanding on the commodification of the art object is shattered and undermined through infusing everyday elements into art and seeing those elements as the art itself. Simply, Abramović's live enactment and immaterialized presence in the long durational performances are enough to politicize her work (Anderson, 2010: 93). Abramović's works address the themes of constant movement, change and process since the 1970s, the time she started to work in the performance art sphere. Especially during her collaboration with Ulay, she created a regenerative *art vital*<sup>12</sup> and continued to examine the physical limits of the body, tested the "psychic energy, transcendental mediation and nonverbal communication." (Stiles and Selz, 1996: 690). The artists' presence in the performance art sphere has been addressed with diverse perspectives on the body. Since the beginning of her artistic practice, which she devotes to explore different possibilities of being present by pushing the limits of her body, art theory has been discussing her work with many different approaches. The major recurring themes within the academic works on Abramović's performances are body, pain, presence, subject-object duality, catharsis, ephemerality, active participation, in betweenness, incorporeality and autonomy.<sup>13</sup>

### 3.3. Open Invitation to The Spectators

Abramović's early performances, specifically the *Rhythm* series (1973-1974), are

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<sup>12</sup> Abramović and Ulay (1980) defined the major elements of the *Relation* series by inventing the term *Art Vital*: no fixed living-place, permanent movement, direct contact, local relation, self-selection, passing limitations, taking risks, mobile energy, no rehearsal, no predicted end, no repetition. The artist statement on the work: Abramović/Ulay. 1980. *Relation Work and Detour*. Amsterdam: Idea Books.

<sup>13</sup> Abramović's body of work in terms of the issue of *masochism* see: Katy O'Dell, (1998) on *presence*: Amelia Jones (2011) on *pain*: Yu-Chien Wu (2009) on *body*: Bojana Pejic, Thomas McEvelley and Toni Stoos (1998).

experimentations with pain, disgust and physical unease. The artist confronted with the concepts of pain, the mental and physical limits of the body, which are the main elements of these fierce performances (Demaria, 2004, 298). Pain and the exhaustion of physical strength are important for the artist's performances because they are accepted as the states of the total presence in one's own body. Physical pain is ineffable; it is nearly impossible to express it through verbal language or even with visual material. Physical pain is situated in a strange position, away from other sensorial, somatic, psychic or perceptual states; pain is not "of" or "for" anything. It cannot be objectified, completely expressed or concretized in any material or verbal form. Pain can only be transferred through imagination, not with crude or passive empathy but with active reactions and direct experience (Demaria, 2004: 302). In this respect, *Rhythm* series opened up an active way for us to perceive and experience physical pain and exceeded the limitations in the process of penetration of pain into the stream of consciousness.

Abramović's performances are generally defined with "openness, mobility, indefatigable, exploration of the physical and mental limits as well as the potential of the human body" (Bernstein, 2005). She took the first steps toward her artistic and personal growth with the *Rhythm* series. In *Rhythm* series, she has started to question the role of the spectators in performance. She has broken the voyeuristic stance of the spectatorship and has assigned them active role in the performance event. She has manifested her body in the site of struggle, pain, pressure, danger and contingencies, and through this manifestation she becomes present both as subject and object (Birringer, 2003: 66). Abramović's progression from painting to installation, to the immaterial, resulted in and at the same time began, with, "flesh" as apparent in her

*Rhythm 10* (1973) performance. She put her left hand onto a thick paper and started stabbing a knife on the gaps of her fingers. She recontextualized this popular drinking game among Yugoslav and Russian peasants (Westcott, 2010: 62). Each time she misses the gap and cuts one of her fingers she changed the knife and continued till she used all twenty knives in the same regulation. Once she completed the first round, she replicated the same action with all its brief pauses of moans by listening the tape she recorded during the first instance.



Figure 1. Marina Abramović, *Rhythm 10*. 1973

During her early solo performance pieces, Abramović has explored the performance art sphere and the possibilities of experimenting with the idea of consciousness. She realized that exploring consciousness requires being willing to enter the state of unconscious. The performance's fierce and painful force illustrated the whole series of the *Rhythm* performances that Abramović was about to engage in. In *Rhythm 5* and *Rhythm 2*, both of which happened in New York City and in 1974, the artist

pushed the limits of her consciousness and became mentally paralyzed and numb. *Rhythm 5* witnessed one of the most canonical imagery through Abramović's performance career. She lied in the center of a five-pointed-star, which was set in fire and typically associated with communism, and because the flames consumed all the oxygen she lost her consciousness and almost died. She was rescued by one of the audiences, which led the artist to think about the unnecessary of the consciousness or control, for the completion of the performance itself. After that point of realization, her performances have become more in search of the ways to reserve the conscious as a provocative anchoring point but at the same time as an insignificant and distant criterion (Phelan, 2004: 571-572).



Figure 2. Marina Abramović. *Rhythm 5*. 1974

The use of the five-pointed star symbol cannot be perceived separate from Abramović's family roots, but she sought for a personal liberation more than a political one. In other words, she was more interested in the ritual of regeneration and attempted to restrain the symbolic power of the star, or rather, resisted to it:

If politics was on the surface of the piece, more transcendent and primordial motivations lay beneath. It was a rite of passage – she would end up going through many of them in her performances – and a self-set test of courage that she passes, having pushed her body beyond the realm of will power and into consciousness (Westcott, 2010: 69).

*Rhythm 5* is an indicator of a novel approach to the performance of self, construction of identity and the experience of a body that exists in the social sphere of the hypermediated 21<sup>st</sup> century. Abramović was engaged in painful and highly individualized acts of body art, which carry certain significance back in that period. Due to the political conditions in the East, performers only had chance to perform in enclosed spaces and groups until the end of the 1970s and in 1990s with the dissolution of communism, globalization and the creation of a new Europe performance art has started to be realized in the public realm (Birringer, 2003: 69). In *Rhythm 2* she took antipsychotic drugs, normally used in the treatment of catatonia and schizophrenia, and intentionally lost her consciousness for a short period.<sup>14</sup> These two performances could be considered sensational than intellectual, but they also give insight about the line between strength and vulnerability, the expressive quality of solo performances. In these early performances, Abramović challenged our conception of acceptable risk; she confronted us with our physical limits and our disembodied nature. She exhibited how pain becomes a reserved area within the range of experience in the modern society. Through placing herself at the boundaries

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<sup>14</sup> In *Rhythm 4* she tests the limits of her endurance and spectators' sense of responsibility by again losing her conscious. The questions how far she can go in controlling the performance. "Alone and naked in a room with a high power industrial fan, she was recorded by a video camera that broadcast the images to the public in a room next door. Abramović pressed her face against the fan, attempting to fill her lungs to bursting point." (Westcott, 71) She fully expected to pass out again, but the cameraman couldn't stand that staying passive watching her laying unconscious in the floor, so he intervened the performance and stopped the fan. Once again, Abramović asked the question of "how far will you let me go" to the spectators and assign an active role to them.

of physical pain and risk, she has become a “potential source of pollution, situating her work at the margins of what is culturally acceptable” (Westcott, 2010: 9). The ritualistic and transgressive body of Abramović has been used in the performances as a way to heal the social disorder. The risks taken by artists in their performances, transformed the established ways of thinking about society and social norms (Warr, 2000, 22).



Figure 3. Marina Abramović. *Rhythm 0*. 1974

Abramović sought the ways of exploring the potential and the power of body art with the hope of gaining a broad understanding of the main structure of conceptual art that rose during the 1960s. She has devoted her artistic practice to invest in mere concepts with the physical and psychic commitment of blood, sweat and fear. Performance art was carried further than theory and has been functioning as a tool to raise artists' and the spectators' art experiences since this period (Westcott, 2010: 72). Abramović confronted audience with pure violence that provokes ethical questions about spectatorship and fierce criticism. Abramović presented an ethical challenge in

*Rhythm* series and this form of augmented real experience was also prominent in *Rhythm 0*. In this sensational performance, Abramović did nothing but gave the full control to the audiences; for six hours she stood still and was manipulated by audiences; her passive body almost became a kind of fetish object (Bernstein, 2005). 72 different objects were placed next to the artist and the audiences were allowed to use them as they desire. Within these objects there were honey, feather, rose, sugar, a bottle of perfume, grapes, olive oil, lipstick, a gold necklace, a hat, which is categorized as pleasure objects, and also chains, needles, scissors, a saw, a pistol and a bullet, which are categorized as pain objects. Throughout the performance, Abramović's body was used as a canvas that audiences could do anything with the tools; after six hours the artist was stripped of, wet, had cuts made with knives, marks and writings done with pens and lipsticks, was kissed by the participants for several times. At the end of the performance, one of the participants loaded the pistol and put it into Abramović's hand and pointed it at her neck, and the act was intervened by another participant. The performances in *Rhythm* series are defined as dematerialized or post-objective art forms; the body, movement and space are perceived independent from the artistic gesture. Rather they are understood through the process of creative act.

### **3.4. A New Way of Seeing**

The artist played with the boundaries of life and death, object and subject, artist and spectator and by doing this, Abramović created a possibility for the disappearance of the commodification and consumption in art scene. She has explored productivity of disappearance; she combined disappearance with significance, personal and political,



alienation and connection, abundance and avoidance, subjectivity and objecthood. The minimalist actions that the artist's body engaged, its collusion with iconic images and the general passivity that masters her performances are used to criticize the consumption element that dominates many art forms in various levels: the consumption of art by its viewers, the consumption of the women body by male gaze and patriarchal and capitalist modes of exchange which promotes the structural prototypes (Anderson, 2010: 101-103). Abramović's performances intervened the classical framework of the aesthetic exchange in the gallery. She altered the consumption routines and put her body at the center of the performance both as subject and object. Through these, the position or the role of the artist and the spectator almost became interchangeable and the spectatorial encounter was placed in a more dynamic range. The artist relied on the power of the live performance in resisting the economy of consumption based on the commodity exchange or aesthetic exchange within the gallery. Abramović constructed a site where "energy", "presence" and "consciousness" can flow without restraint and declared this site, the performance, as a sign of the live. Through the artist's "haunting, at times overwhelmingly affective work the gallery becomes the world" (Anderson, 2010: 90-91).

Performance art engenders a unique form of spectacle. Passive voyeurism is turned into appropriation of the other's experiences, specifically the artist's, who engages in various painful activities. This form of spectatorship breaks the conventions of desensitized, unproductive and indifferent mode of seeing the traumatized body that is highly encountered in the mainstream media. Abramović's performances, which expose the spectators to a traumatized body, offer ways to become a *response-able*

spectator. The question is the ways to gain an ethical witnessing of the others' traumatized body and not to see that body as an object. Many performance artists<sup>15</sup>, including Abramović, problematized the issue of personal and collective trauma in their performances; they questioned the forms of power, oppression and the traumatized body (Oliver, 2010: 119).

Performance art, by its very nature, opens up a new discussion about the ways that the traumatized body is contextualized. This discussion leads us to an ethical form of spectatorship. The ethical mode of spectacle that performance art offers is not only about being *response-able* toward a suffering subject or a traumatized body. It also heightens the viewers' own self-consciousness on their performative presence while they are witnessing others' traumas. The spectator as an embodied entity gains a perspective on the relation between representation and presentation by engaging in either a mediated or direct *seeing* activity. In this sense, performance art not only provides an understanding about the "spectated body" of the artist but also the spectating body of the viewer. What is meant by "ethics" here is not isolated from the states of disgust, guilt or voyeuristic pleasure; the ethical mode of seeing embraces a wide range of responses toward a spectacle of trauma (Oliver 2010, 121). Exploring the corporeal spectacle of the others' trauma or suffering, gives rise to a several responses from desire to disgust, to pity or to passive voyeurism. Within this wide range of feelings emerged in the form of the spectacle, it is rather useless and even problematic to examine unethical spectatorship.

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<sup>15</sup> The performances of Vito Acconci, Gina Pane, Hannah Wilke, Carolee Schneemann, Ana Mendiata, Chris Burden, Yvonne Rainer, Charlesmagne Palestine are experiments with pain as a use for transmitting social knowledge and shaping collective memory.

Restraining the limits of unethical spectatorship is useless since it favors certain kind of spectatorial responses rather than seeking the ways to benefit from understanding the discomfort of seeing. In performance studies, it is crucial to embrace and accept the discomfort of seeing because, performance art is nourished by this particular mode of spectatorship and it reaches a political state through that. Abramović, because of working with disgust, anxiety or voyeuristic pleasures, has become “embodied and active, seeing as well as seen. Performance art encourages a revised formulation of spectatorial ethics, one that is not based only in the imposition of ideal or appropriate response” (Oliver, 2010: 121-123). In *Rhythm 0* the participants acted “unethical” and harmed Abramović in various ways, which may create an illusion of the presence of a passive, unmoving and morally indifferent figure of an unethical spectator. However, since the performance evokes an intersubjective, communicative and dialogic way of seeing, it is still considered having a thoroughly ethical mode of spectatorship and it invites spectators to perform and acts upon the performance (Oliver, 2010: 126). Abramović’s performances and performance art in general, transform our view on the traumatized body; we define the spectacle of trauma by using new terms. Body is no longer seen as alien or other; our notion about the body as an object has dramatically changed. Through this awareness, the corporeal gains significance and it is appraised as a site of resistance and expression in the face of trauma.

### 3.5 Blood, Sweat and Tears

Between the years of 1973 and 1976, Abramović did twelve solo performances and each performance focused on the cathartic liberation of mind, body and memory with the purpose of healing the alienated self. Abramović's primary medium, the human body, was introduced with the outside world; the effects of cultural, political, social and aesthetic pressure and violence upon the body (Anderson, 2010: 105). In *Art Must Be Beautiful / Artist Must Be Beautiful* (1975), Abramović overthrew the idea of socially constructed femininity by aggressively attacking her hair with a hairbrush, while standing naked and constantly repeating the phrase "art must be beautiful, artist must be beautiful".



Figure 4 Marina Abramović. *Art Must Be Beautiful / Artist Must Be Beautiful*. 1975

The automatic reaction can be understood as with feminist reading: Abramović is involved in a self-destructive and painful act in order to fulfill societal, and art historical, essential and ideal view of beauty while at the same time criticizing,

ironizing and attacking to it. Beauty had been serious and pathological issue since Abramović's childhood years,<sup>16</sup> and she was fighting with her beauty in this performance and "making feminine martyr of herself" (Westcott, 2010: 96). In Abramović's own words; "This piece was not talking about beauty and actually denying the idea of beauty, because I think that if art is only beautiful, it's really short-lived, or limited in a conceptual way" (Jongh and Gold, 2005: 92).

The voluntary exposure of the artist's body to danger and pain within the context of performance art, has a semiotic and symbolic quality through the artistic process and exceeds the definition of sadomasochism. The artist strengthens the provocative power of art, liberates the consciousness of the spectators by exposing herself to danger. Danger is an existential element and element of life, appropriated by the artists who believe in the social function of the art; "danger is not a thrill, but a despair, an energy, a hope, a warning, an insistence- a human quality" (Weibel, 1978 cited in Warr 2000). Abramović's exploration of physical and psychic pain, endurance, and their relation with personal and collective trauma has continued with *Lips of Thomas* (1975). The performance is frequently associated with the artist's earlier piece *Rhythm 5* because of its formal characteristic and connotations. The disturbing and drastic performance is the accumulation of religious, political and pathological symbols that have fundamental effects on Abramović (Westcott, 2010: 82). The flaming star in *Rhythm 5* was transformed into a cut in Abramović's stomach in *Lips of Thomas*. In *Lips of Thomas* there were explicit references to

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<sup>16</sup> She was arranging different "accidents" to break her nose and have an aesthetic surgery. One day she was spinning fastly around her bed wishing to get dizzy and hit her nose on to the edge of her bed and break it, with the pictures of Bridget Bardot in her pocket to show the doctors what type of nose she wants before the surgery. However, the only thing that she get from her "first performance" was a cut in her face (Westcott 2010: 96).

Christianity, even the title itself reveals many things about the most common reading of the performance. During the Christ's crucifixion, the only one that was allowed to touch Christ's wounds and thus verified their reality was Thomas. Where in *Lips of Thomas*, the audience was the only value of judgment; they see Abramović's wounds and she was realized only through their witnesses: "Her wounds makes pain readable as inscribed in and on the body" (Jones, 2009: 35). During the two hours that the performance took place, Abramović ate a kilo of honey and drunk a bottle of red wine, which could be interpreted as the signifiers of Christ's body and blood. The over consumption of these normally pleasurable substances turns into a self-directed violent act. Afterwards, she cut her stomach with a razor blade and drew a five-pointed star onto it.



Figure 5. Marina Abramović. *Lips of Thomas*.1975

The bleeding star is a reminder of the physical and psychological traces that socialism leaves on the artist and also it represents the red star symbol of Yugoslavian communism for decades. She continued the performance by whipping herself until the point that she got numb and to soothe her pain and anxiety she rest onto a cruciform ice bed, until audience members remove the ice under Abramović and ends the performance (Richards, 2010; 12). The core idea behind *Lips of Thomas* is exploring the transcendent mental state achieved through the endurance of physical pain, like all of the Abramović's performance works (Iles, 1998: 193).

Abramović's solo performances, wild sometimes desperate, always frightening for the audience, as well as for the artist herself, created scars from a period that was particularly crucial for her life experience: a politically aware early youth in post-war Yugoslavia, the extremes of her parents' secular partisanship with Serbian Orthodox rituals of her grandmother. The act of mark making and the haunting star figure in the performances signify a place and constitute an identity. The act of cutting and the marks on Abramović's body are seen as "rudiment of trauma and a source of destruction of identity (...) a signature of capture that both designates and disguises identity" (Stiles, 2008: 54). Physical pain and the cut itself are interpreted as a site where social and personal identity is reinvented or destructed. However, these interpretations, which emphasize the social significance of marking a body, disregard the ways that the bleeding wound creates a visual *affect* and physical pain. Through the following chapter, I will specifically focus on the power of Abramović's performances in creating affective imagery, where I will elaborate on the term *affect* and its significance in the artists' latest performance *The Artist Is Present*. In the case of *Lips of Thomas*, Yu-Chien Wu (2009: 69), who is a performance studies scholar,

courageously decontextualizes the performance, strips it out of the obvious reading and provides a novel, moving and distinctive understanding on it. Wu seeks the ways of perceiving the bleeding star beyond its reference to artist's inner pain and explores the cut's way to manifest "pain as a transferable material". The star does not function as a signifier rather it becomes the signified itself. In other words, she addresses pain not as a representation but as a way for presenting and transmitting flows of affects. In this form of understanding, pain is not necessarily connected to the traumatized body of Christ or the trauma that Abramović suffers.<sup>17</sup>

Regarding the experience that the artist gained through the vast amount of arduous performances she did, Abramović (2008: 22) stated that "pain is like a door and you have to enter through the pain into that other space". Pain sensations place bodies in a ubiquitous space, shape them as they turned into malleable substances. Thus, experience of pain not only fasten these bodies into the present, but connects them with the world of other bodies. Pain's ineffable state was shattered through this renovating view and by pointing out its spatial nature, the term is moved outside of the closed inner circle and left representational status. *Lips of Thomas* created a

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<sup>17</sup> In "Mourning Sex", Peggy Phelan refers to Caravaggio's painting *The Incredulity of St Thomas* (1601) to explain how the wound is transformed into a site of transformation and of witnessing in Abramović's *Lips of Thomas* (1975). In Caravaggio's painting, the wound is turned into a physical mark of separation between one and the other. Thomas is there to prove Christ's resurrection, which cannot be authenticated by God. In other words, "Chris relies upon Thomas's finger so as to make him believe the part he played in his father script was real" (33) For Phelan, the bleeding star of Abramović functions in the same way with Christ's wound in the painting. As in *The Incredulity of St Thomas*, the wound in Abramović's body becomes a space that allows viewers to penetrate into the performance. Abramović presents her body to the viewers in the same way that Caravaggio's Christ opens up his body to the curious finger of Thomas. Thomas in the painting and the spectators in Abramović's performance put their fingers on Christ's and Abramović's wounds witness and experience the pain, connect with the artworks in an unmediated way.



shocking scene or in Jill Bennett's (2005: 12) terms "affective imagery". Bennett makes a strong statement about the performance and says "one cannot perceive the star except as wounding process". In this particular performance, pain is seen and felt through the bleeding star, which also transfers the message of "I am in pain." The carved star does not simply function as a mark of a trauma, but it becomes a channel through which the "experience of pain and the philosophical grammar of pain encounter one another" (Wu, 2009: 71). The bleeding star is transformed into an arena or a vanishing point, where the experiences of pain can get in and out and creates different layers and dimensions of that experience rather than constituting layers of meaning. In the devastating performance *Lips of Thomas*, Abramović created penetrating as well as a penetrated cut which provides a space for pain to be sheltered. By the means of this visceral wound, a historical signification of the star symbol is shattered and a carved flesh, a bloody cut emerges. Through this transformation, the possibility of transferring pain, instead of representing it is heightened (Wu, 2009: 73).

Through *performative turn* the binaries between subject and object, spectator and actor are dissolved. *Lips of Thomas* was given as an example of this turn in the spectators position due to their direct physical contact with the artist and power to change the performance's destiny by protecting Abramović's bodily integrity. The audience became actors through the effect of shock and power of provocation; the performance provoked a wide range of sensations in the spectators from shock, horror, disgust, and nausea to curiosity, agony or sympathy. Throughout the performance they experienced the feeling of excessive amount of anger, excitement or amusement and found an opportunity to interfere Abramović's destructive action.

The affects that were aroused during *Lips of Thomas* were powerful enough to trigger the audience to intervene, rather than putting an effort to establish identification with what they see on the scene, to constitute meaning or to interpret the event. The central concern of the performance was not to understand the performance but to fully experience it, and to cope with these experiences, which could not be replaced then and there by identification and reflection of one's thoughts and feelings (Fischer-Lichte, 2008: 14-17).

### **3.6 Love of Art: Ulay and Abramović**

Throughout these intense series of performances, Abramović violently tested the cultural and physical limits of her body, explored the physical and psychic pain, turned her body into a site of inscription where spectators are introduced with intensive meaning making and engagement processes. Marina Abramović majorly shifted her attention to become more acquainted with the idea of being present, and transformation and communication of energies after meeting with a West German artist Frank Uwe Laysiepen (Ulay) in 1975. Ulay has a very significant role in shaping Abramović's performance art practice as well as her private life. Two artists spent 12 years together between the years of 1975 and 1988, which were filled with numerous experimentations with performance medium and long trips where they encountered with different sides of the inner and outer world. Abramović has started her journey to explore female energy alongside masculine dynamics. Abramović's and Ulay's performance collaborations question the relation between two individuals in a plane of time and space. *Relation in Time* (1977) exemplifies this goal where they sat back to back for 16 hours with their hair intertwined. At the end of the 16<sup>th</sup>

hour, the audience entered into the space, where only the completely still and silent artists and a photographer documenting the event were in. The audience witnessed the exhaustion, tiredness, stillness and other moving elements between the performers, and they joined the performance in an intensified phase that Abramović explained as “ many things happened, space was transformed and charged with an energy that the audience had to confront” (Denegri, 1998: 20).

Starting with Abramović’s collaborative performances with Ulay, the term “energy” has become prominent. The transformation through the artist’s performances is rooted in the flows of energies. This inexhaustible expectation on the transformation that performance art offers, which marks the last 30 years of Abramović’s works and the general performance art field can be explored through understanding how energy resonates in the performance. At the time she met Ulay, she had begun to research on Eastern philosophies to explore how they use these ceremonies to heighten the states of self-awareness. She then applied her knowledge on Shamanistic rituals and Eastern philosophies to her instinctual and notably expressive performances. Ulay was also absorbed in Tibetan Buddhism, Sufi and Indian philosophies, so their collaboration mainly aim to create a path to reach a novel state of consciousness for both the artists and the spectators. They created a sense of ceremony and by use of long durational performances a certain energy transmission, sourced from the relation between Ulay and Abramović and transferred to the audience, occurred (Warr, 2010: 32). The tone of Abramović’s works has significantly changed since the 1970s, when she was involved in extremely violent, self-destructing and provocative acts and her body was seen as a flesh more than anything else. From the excessive use of body in pain, her performances moved toward to, in Abramović’s words, “the

simple and direct transmission of energy” within the ritualized performances.

Energy is inscribed and transferred and the major shift in the quality of the lived experience occurs:

The crucial aspect of a performance is the direct relationship with the audience, the transmission of energy between the doer and the viewer. What is a performance? It is a sort of material and spiritual construction in which artist places herself in front of an audience. It is not a theatre play, it is not something you have to learn and then repeat, identifying with a character. It is a totally direct transmission of energy (Abramović in Denegri, 1998: 13).

The passage of energy unites separate dimensions within the performance; it constitutes the performance as a curious encounter between an artist and an audience. Energy creates a potential site for transduction it functions as a “form of symbolic efficacy operated by and through a text for and to a receiver” (Demaria, 2004: 305).

Through the creation of an energy field in Abramović’s performances, meaning and making the change possible in an ephemeral rather than intellectual or empirical way. Abramović (et.al., 2004: 7) asked questions such as “Can I change my energy field? Can this energy field change the energy field of the audience and the space?” Abramović’s concern about creating an energy field in the performance sphere raises a more general question about the potential of performance. Abramović has been seeking the ways to explore what really happens in the performance space and how can we perceive, experience and measure its productive and generative potential. In this space, the spectators and the artist joins “an energy dialogue” through an uninterrupted gaze, sharing a mutual and somehow sacred space, surrounded by active senses and being a part of intensely relational and durational performances.

A more recent solo performance that was built around the idea of energy exchange is

*The House with the Ocean View* (2002) in Sean Kelly Gallery where Abramović had lived in for twelve days. She only got involved with simple, survival activities and avoided talking, reading, writing or any other way of communicating. Abramović was not the first performance artist who lived in an art gallery for a long time during the 1970s. She repeats and extends the performances of Chris Burden, Linda Montano, Gerard Richter, Gilbert and George, and others. However, there is a major difference between these performances and *The House with the Ocean View*: the artists performed “for” the audience, not “with” them. During the performance, Abramović’s hyper-present body was viewed through the glass, a giant telescope that breaks her privacy in an extremely detailed manner (Cesare and Joy, 2006: 171). In the Abramović’s performance the public was invited to join the performance and had a significant role as participating an energy dialogue with the artist and other spectators. This energy exchange was possible since the spectators were returning and holding the artist’s gaze and this exchange circulated between the artist, the participants and the ones that observe other viewers.



Figure 6. Marina Abramović. *House with the Ocean View*. 2002

At the core of the performance, the mutual and repeated effort to realize consciousness as simultaneously and intensely personal and at the same time as vast and impersonal quantity lies. Phelan (2004: 575) also highlighted the importance of the possibility of both the participant's and the performer's reciprocal transformation within the live event since this is the point where the aesthetic joins the ethical: "The ethical is fundamentally related to live art because both are arenas for the unpredictable force of the social event." In *The House with the Ocean View*, Abramović turned artist's body into a site where she refused aesthetic commodification and exhibited the *affect* and the effects of "silent abnegation" (Anderson, 2010: 105). In Phelan's terms, she attempted to "illuminate the mutual and repeated attempt to grasp, if not fully apprehend, consciousness as simultaneously intensely personal and immensely vast and impersonal" (Phelan 2004: 574).



Figure 7. Marina Abramović. *Breathing In / Breathing Out*.1977

The sacred space that Abramović necessitates for the realization of the performance,

has become a shelter for her collaboration with Ulay. Before the period with Ulay, Abramović's works were fatalistic and destructive, with the effect of their mutual effort and energy performances became more constructive (Kontova, 1978: 126-127). The artists used various techniques to highlight performance's "liveness"; they devoted their relation to explore the creative and constructive possibilities within the performance's nature. These two committed individuals, showed deeply rooted connection to the performance art as well as to one another (Richards 2010: 17). They produced performances that have no rehearsals, no pre-determined ends, no repetitions and they have longed for the unified sense of self and the ways to come together, meet in harmony. The synthesis they were looking for is not a sexual unity, rather their relation are flourished by shared subjectivity and sense of spirituality.

Their initial experimentations with the medium were revealed in the *Relation* series. In *Relation in Space* (1976) two fearless artists and lovers, approached each other with their bodies naked in different speeds and and their bodies are collided at the center, where a unique form of energy is revealed.<sup>18</sup> They did various performances together that they have questioned the product of feminine and masculine energies and the productivity in the absence of them, the dynamics of masochisms, their psychic connection, the art historical discourse of male/female roles in art, nomadic

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<sup>18</sup> In *Interruption in Space* (1977) and *Expansion in Space* (1977) the artists were looking for similar kind of production of energies. *Interruption in Space* (1977) where the performers, in a space divided into two by a wall, walked and ran repeatedly into the wall from opposites sides of the space, and *Expansion in Space* (1977) in which each performer, back to back in the centre of the space, ran outwards at one of two mobile (but weighty) columns, so that the force of their bodies hitting the columns gradually moves each column fractionally (Richards, 2009: 18).

existence and the mutual presence of their bodies.<sup>19</sup> Among these subject matters, the revelation and exchange of energy was always in the focus of their collaborative effort. In *Breathing In / Breathing Out* (1977), they exchanged breath until they fainted; two performers blocked their noses and shared a single breath as long as they could. This mouth-to-mouth connection passed beyond the physical engagement, they recycle the most basic source of living for 19 minutes. Through this time, they operated and existed as one and they suffocated and annihilated as a single object and subject. This loss of self and individuality gave birth to a reciprocal, unsustainable yet forceful energy that is the core of living, as the smallest segment of life as a single breath, as well as the core of their performance. This piece is a certain demonstration of their overreliance; it shows what happens when one person becomes the pure and only source of nourishment. The performance is not encapsulated within the personal boundaries and it reveals a universal matter of fact about of the limits of human interdependency.

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<sup>19</sup> LIMA, the center that preserves, distributes and researches media art based in Amsterdam, has almost all of the performances of Ulay and Abramović (1976 -1988) in their online catalogue. The extensive visual documentation, both video and photography, of the artists' collaborative works and Abramović's solo pieces (1975-2010) are available in LIMA.





Figure 8. Marina Abramović. *Rest Energy*. 1980

Another performance piece, *Rest Energy* (1980) is also located in the similar energy field and context with the previous performances that were discussed above. Ulay and Abramović faced each other with a bow and an arrow between them. Abramović was holding the bow and across her, Ulay was holding the string and the arrow. Both were leaning backward to achieve the ideal balance that helps them to pull the string tight and Ulay was pointing the arrow directly toward Abramović's heart. They continued to stay still until one of them lost concentration and got too exhausted to continue. Although Ulay has the physical power over Abramović because of the performance's formal setting, her discomforting gaze saved the performance from being dominated by the discussion of gender roles in art world and society in general.

*Rest Energy* defined the space between the lovers and drew a distinction in their positions as a site of moral danger and exciting possibilities, however not equally for two: Ulay had the agency of the bow he was holding where as Abramović was

positioned as a potential victim (Anderson, 2010: 104). The performance confirms their pure trust to each other and the strength their mutual bond, effort and commitment to risk in and for performance. *Rest Energy* is defined “hyperaware, uncluttered and bold” performance, and it was also Abramović’s and Ulay’s simplest and intense encounter with death and deadly interdependence (Westcott, 2010: 154). In 1988, after went through a shattering yet nourishing period of making performances and sharing life for 12 years, Abramović and Ulay ended their deep relationship and profound artistic collaboration with again a ritualistic performance, *The Lovers*. They individually walked the Great Wall of China; Ulay starting from the West and Abramović from the East, to meet after 90 days to definitely separate. Their ritualistic separation put its mark to Abramović’s future career and awoke the individual quality of her work: “As they had discovered through their joint and separate work, the universality of experience could only truly be experienced by those who had abandoned the concept of dualism. It is this universality that Abramović’s solo work continues to address” (Iles, 1998: 194).

*The Lovers* defined Abramović’s future performances and art career in many ways: it gave hope to the artist about spectators’ continuous interest to exceptionally long-durational works, it reduced the distance between the personal and the national by tracing the interpersonal relationship on the Wall that originally constructed to protect China from the invaders from the North (Anderson, 2010: 104).



Figure 9. Marina Abramović and Ulay. *The Lovers*. 1988

After freeing herself from the highly interdependent and embodied form of love, leaving the turmoil and at the same time years Abramović continued to perform alone and she shifted her attention more on to the exploration of states of presence and consciousness. She also pursued her interest in shamanistic rituals and spiritual practices and sought the ways to merge this fascination with the performance pieces. The excessive use of self-destructing, violent and provocative acts that dominate Abramović's earlier performances have significantly shifted from the symbolic to a minimalist existentialism. Although she continued to create an explicit confrontation of violence against bodies, the way that she realized this masochistic sense of performance became highly tranquil (Birringer, 2003: 66). Abramović's main concern developed into searching the ways of ritualizing the simple, everyday actions that are not usually considered within the art context such as sitting, thinking, looking, sleeping. She used these actions as transitory states and instruments to manifest the unique mental state that allows the realization of the performance (Abramović et.al.,2004: 8-14).

### 3.7 The Preservation of Performance Art

Abramović dedicated the last decade of her performance art practice to the ways to preserve the ephemeral performance pieces. Although the general understanding about performance art is that the medium can only exist in the present, Abramović seeks ways to document, recreate and vitalize the pieces. In *Seven Easy Pieces* (2005) that she did in Guggenheim Museum in New York City, Abramović drew attention to the ways of remembering. It is no coincidence that she did this particular performance that asked the question of “how we remember” right after then-recent 9/11 terrorist action, so that it was considered a meditation to the event. The re-performances or “performance covers” of canonical performance works from performance art history, presents us a novel way of remembering and recontextualizing these works with an embodied documentation and recreation of performances (Cesare and Joy, 2006: 170). Abramović recreated the seven performance pieces, that the artist had not witnessed, and once were time changing and seminal within the performance art sphere, over seven consecutive nights in the Guggenheim’s rotunda. She reinvented, reinterpreted and reperformed Bruce Nauman’s *Body Pressure* (1974), Vito Acconci’s *Seedbed* (1972), VALIE EXPORT’s *Action Pants: Genital Panic* (1972), Gina Pane’s *The Conditioning* (1973) and Josephy Beuys’s *How to Explain Pictures to a Dead Hare* (1965) and her own work *Lips of Thomas* (1975). *Seven Easy Pieces* carries certain significance since it brings a “liveness” back to the influential and significant art works that normally only exist in art history books with grainy black-and-white images and spectators’ memories (Blackson 2007:38). In her well recognized essay on this topic, *The Ontology of Performance: Representation without Reproduction*, Phelan (1993:

146) defined performances' significance with its irreproducibility: "To the degree that performance attempts to enter the economy of reproduction it betrays and lessens the promise of its own ontology.... Performance is the attempt to value that which is nonreproductive, nonmetaphorical". Abramović, however, went beyond this discussion and revolutionized the ways of the use of reenactment in contemporary art with her innovative use of it for the performances (Blackson, 2007:39).



Figure 10. Marina Abramović. *Seven Easy Pieces*. 2005

In documenting time-based, ephemeral artworks, like performance art by using static mediums, such as photography or video is mostly regarded as insufficient. It is believed that the documentation by these static mediums cannot capture the very essence of the performance; they convey the work but not the live event itself (Phelan 2004: 570). Although the use of film or video provides an accurate description and a record of the actions within the performance, it cannot reflect the presence of the performer's body and the dialogue between the spectator and the

performer, which is crucial in understanding performance art (Santone, 2008: 151). Witnessing the live performance and experiencing the event rather than seeing the resulting performance create very different impressions about the work. Phelan (1993: 148) claimed that performance is about disappearance and tracelessness rather than preservation, and continued to say “performance indicates the possibility of revaluing”. However, preservation here is mostly associated with static media, which is unsuccessful in providing an authentic witnessing mode for the spectators.

In this regard live performance is associated with intimacy and disappearance whereas the mass media documentation is seen as reproduction and repetition. Phelan underlined performance’s existence in the present moment: “Performance honors the idea that a limited number of people in a specific time/space frame can have an experience of value which leaves no visible trace afterward.” (Phelan, 1993: 149). The spectator’s response cannot alter the pre-recorded performance and thus, these documentation or in a wider sense representations are indifferent to the reactions. This indifference destroys the fundamental effect that performance creates through interactivity. *Seven Easy Pieces* transformed eyewitness memory and historical documentation into a flourishing way of constructing history through reenactment and raised important questions about the possibilities in and acceptance of the documentation of performance art. Through this creative act, the reliability of the original source is demolished, instead value of the re-performance or the reproduction of the performance as an analytical and exciting link between the past and present gains acknowledgment (Blackson, 2007:40). The search of mythic “original” in art historical perspective is recovered by questioning authenticity, reliability and sufficiency of documentation. An analysis of re-performance and

performance documentation can provide insights for the ways of the preservation of time-based art and promotes critical thought on this topic.

Abramović's re-performances in *Seven Easy Pieces* created performative documents of the past performances; performative documentation of durational arts must be replayed, reread or reinterpreted in order to be experienced (Santone, 2008: 147). The performances strive against the flattening approach of art historical sense of preservation of performance art, which heavily relies on the image or video documentation, and reproduce or renovate that history. Consequently, "the historical repetition of performance as producing a kind of counter-memory— creates different way of knowing history than traditionally understood from archives" (Santone, 2008: 151). The re-performances appear as the echoes of single past moments and they do not claim to be the full re-embodiments of the works. The appropriation of the performances generates the questions of authorship, medium and authenticity. In *Seven Easy Pieces* as one of the most well-known artist produced documentation projects in the performance history, authenticity plays a preliminary role in shaping the performance. Each re-performance or documentation is circulated around the pursuit of "original experience". Re-performances and reenactments are rooted in the idea of original, grows from there, diverges in different ways, gets connected to other documentations and at the end presents a comprehensive picture of the whole. Re-performance provides a dynamic and living document as a solution to the disappearance of past as well as the performance's essence. It proposes an innovative way to re-experiencing the "original" work, which is basically ephemeral, body and time based, and flourishes the emergence of new experiences of memory. In doing so, Abramović's reenactments remind the "found, yet constructed quality of both

archives and documents and encourage performative and critical responses from the spectators as we contemplate new documentation strategies” (Santone 2008: 150-151). Abramović’s exploration of embodying ways of the preservation of performance art becomes more explicit in her retrospective *The Artist Is Present*.

### **3.8 *The Artist Is Present*: A Silent Ballad**

The performance that Abramović herself performed in her retrospective *Marina Abramović: The Artist Is Present* (2010) at the Museum of Modern Art New York (MoMA) curated by Klaus Biesenbach, is a reenactment of *Nightsea Crossing* (1981-87), performed a dozen times in different places during the 1980s by Abramović and Ulay. They sat still, opposite each other and shared long, silent gazes for a long duration, changing between one and sixteen days. During this period of time, they did not talk, did not eat, did not move, just shared the uninterrupted gaze; they shared “the fullness of emptiness” between the lovers and work partners (Goldberg, 1995: 15). The enormous physical pain of sitting still for long periods and overwhelmingly intense contact between the artists saturated the emptiness and created a transitory state. Abramović (Westcott, 2010: 258) described the piece with pure, simple yet powerful phrases:

Presence.  
Being present, over long stretches of time,  
Until presence rises and falls, from  
Material to immaterial, from  
From to formless, from  
Instrumental to mental, from  
Time to timeless

One of the major claims of *The Artist Is Present*, as it is revealed in the title, is *presence* which is a frequently used term in discussions of performance art both from



art historical and performance studies perspective. In the retrospective, the galleries, with dramatically lid and darkened walls had the glass panels that contained physical traces of early performances of Abramović. The objects that she had used during past performances and the visual media documentation were presented in those cabinets. Another gallery had a giant archive of the photographs of the artists from her birth and covered her past life experiences. There were also galleries filled with the live re-enactments of the artist's performances from 1970s, performed by the young performance artist that Abramović has trained by herself. Through all these documents and reperformances, Abramović's former artistic and individual presence was deployed (Phelan, 1993: 17). *The Artist Is Present* has traces of Abramović's prolific career with nearly 50 works, consisted of the four decades of sound pieces video works, installations, photography and both solo and collaborative performances. The footprints and reenactments of her influential historical pieces were exhibited in a chronological installation that reflects the different modes of representing, documenting and exhibiting the artist's ephemeral time and media based works. Alongside the haunting shadows of her past, she performed a new piece that lasted for 736 hours 30 minutes. For her longest performance to date, Abramović sat silent, passively invited visitors to join her in an unmediated and uninterrupted gaze. Duration has always been fundamental in communicating with and understanding of Abramović's performances, the ephemeral works of art. The artist's works mostly last for over days, weeks or months and the durability of the performance also questions the intersubjective presence. Watching Abramović in a complete stillness, pain and minimal action for long periods of time, audiences actively engaged with the act of witnessing and become the subject of the performance's climax (Anderson, 2010: 93).

In the white, sterile and modernist atrium of MoMA, Abramović presented her latest performance piece in a simple yet dazzling setting. She was sitting in a chair across from another chair in which the visitors could sit for as long as they want to and could engage with her “presence”.<sup>20</sup> Abramović was there, sitting, everyday for the entire time that Museum was open, portrayed the artist’s presence in the most literal way. The retrospective reflected Abramović’s interest in the performance history and her perspective on the presence and authenticity of live art and the emotional impact of long durational arts (Jones, 2011: 17). Presence is not readily available to us, rather it is achieved, it is discovered through accepting that the world is not a remote object of contemplation. The world we experience does not show up for us as represented in a picture, or in any other visual medium. Rather, “it is present, not as represented, not as internalized, not as pictorial, but rather as accessible” (Noë, 2012: 33).

Abramović’s historically significant performances enlivened in *The Artist Is Present*, were defined as moving and provocative, and they explicitly demonstrated the junction of presence and absence, here and gone, subjectivity and objecthood. Moreover, they built an indestructible bridge between the individual body of artist

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<sup>20</sup> In the first month, there was also a table between the chairs, as in setting of the *Nightsea Crossing*. However, she removed the table after she sat with a man in the wheelchair and realizing that she only communicated with a fraction of the visitor’s bodies. She felt disconnected and psychologically distanced from the individual she faced and the performance became more open and immediate. This decision is also parallel to Abramović’s closeness to the immaterial art. After the removal of the table, the public’s reaction has significantly changed, they started to show their emotions quicker than before, for Abramović, the removal of the table was also the removal of the all obstacles (Pearson and Kern, 2011).

and the social body of the spectator (Anderson, 2010: 109). *The Artist Is Present* opens up a discussion about what we can possibly know about performance art and the limits of artist's presence. Presence widely perceived as a state of unmediated existence in time and place, that provides a transparency to the observer of what *is* at the very moment and at which it takes place. However, Jones (2011: 18) noted that, the performance by connecting materiality and durationality, because points to the fact its' enacting of the body always tied to past makes presence impossible, that there is no pure *presence* at all. This paradox of the performance is not exclusive to *The Artist Is Present*, rather this discussion haunts performance studies and other art history discourses looking for ways to conceptualize, theorize and historicize the live performance art.<sup>21</sup>

In performance art, and in mostly any kind of visual art medium, the documentation of the audience as a part of the art action is so rare. The visual or oral documentation of performance art is concerned about reflecting artist's stance about the performance and making the work available to a larger audience. This type of documentation does not pay attention to the performance's ability to establish an interaction based on the mutual effort, contribution and gathering of a specific group of people in a specific performance setting and in specific time. The available information and critique on performance art is obtained from the first-person observer's impressions on the work itself; the audience's contribution and transformative power is neglected. The characteristics of the performance are defined without including the way the

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<sup>21</sup> Derrida has examined his ideas about presence in European philosophy by pointing out "the visibility and spatiality of performance (as itself a kind of redo of real life) can only ever be experienced through the senses; "presence" the live body in performance, is representational" (see Derrida 1973: 64,65)

audiences perceive a particular performance in a particular time and place, and the meaning that they acquire (Auslander, 2006: 6). Regardless of the performance art's intention to heighten the effects of the spectator's existence on the meaning making processes of the work, the documentation do not go any further than participating in the reproduction of works and disregard the capturing of events. Abramović's *Rhythm 0* (1974) and especially *The Artist Is Present* (2010) are significant in terms of witnessing and presenting an excessive amount of documentation not only on the performance but also on the spectators. Since those performances are specifically rooted in the interaction between the artist and the spectators, these documentations record and recreate the artist's work embedded in the total interaction. Through this recreation and comprehensive approach, the act of documenting itself becomes a performative act; the performance is framed through this performative act of documenting (Auslander, 2006, 6-7). Approximately 750.000 viewers visited *The Artist Is Present*, and during the 3 consecutive months that it was performed, the vast amount of images, comments and reviews were spontaneously appeared. Even from the first day, the reaction toward the performance was sensational, people sat across Abramović and engaged in an open, collective and creative experience, and an affective encounter. The retrospective received a storm of critical and popular media coverage about the performance and the other process pieces. The performance lost its opacity and incomprehensibility and opened to the spectators; it became available and accessible to the viewers, they can see the piece and appreciate its structure. The performance, as well as the artist, became present to you as meaningful. The work of art, or the performance in this case, becomes visible through the understanding; it enables the participants to perceive in the work, what cannot be perceived or retrieved before (Noë, 2012:1-2).

*The Artist Is Present* has encouraged a “kinaesthetic connection” between the artist and the audience. This dynamic and kinaesthetic interaction is central to the embodied and experiential reception of the performance. The community of individual spectators, who gathered around Abramović’s performance space or temple and physically in motion with her were considered to be a part of “visceral-visual performance”. The performance space was collectively shared, united and unrestrained, and thanks to these characteristics, the possibility of generating the sense of feeling more present at the performance and being more embedded in it, are heightened. Body of the spectator is a path to reach the profound experience in the performance; the performance was received through it. In the case of *The Artist Is Present*, the performance’s density engulfed the spectators into the core of it so that they could fully experience the performance and also themselves within it. Such kind of strong engagement made it impossible for spectators to engaged in a process of self-objectification or alienation. It is the physical connection between bodies in the performance space that actually gives the power and attribute the meaning to the artist’s enactments. Getting involved in a live event, witnessing other bodies’ movements in front of you, positions you in a direct corporeal relationship with the performer and the other bodies. The live performance’s unique quality is to provide a felt experience, through which we could viscerally be connected to the performance presented to us. The kinaesthetic experience and connection become available to the spectators, to the level that they get close enough to the action almost to feel the movements and hear the sounds of the performer’s body.



Figure 11. Marina Abramović. *The Artist Is Present*. 2010

*The Artist Is Present*, provocatively presented the artist's body; Abramović's vulnerable, still and stoic body was deeply close to the spectator and since they directly looked eye to eye even a small movement and gesture could be caught in the participant's attention, she embraced the potential of creating a kinaesthetic experience for the visitors. In this form of engagement, unlike other static visual art mediums as film or painting, audience is encircled in the enactment. Rather than removed or distanced from the action by screen or canvas, the spectators of the performance could closely witness the artist's body; they can sense, hear, see or even smell her body. Phelan (2004: 577) accentuated the importance of physical connection in the performance and specifically mentioned the face-to-face encounter's revealing power:

The condition of witnessing what one did not (and perhaps cannot) see is the condition of whatever age we are now entering. Whether we call this period "the postmodern age" or "the age of terrorism," it is characterized both by an intimate reawakening to the fragility of life and a more general sense of connection to one another that exceeds simple geophysical, ideological, or cultural proximity. The face-to-face encounter is the most crucial arena in which the ethical

bond we share becomes manifest, then live theatre and performance might speak to philosophy with renewed vigor.

This connection places us in the frame of both responsibility for and participation in the action. Being in a collective space triggers this active involvement of the participants of the performance; individuals are not positioned in a darkened auditorium in comfy seats where they can easily convince themselves that they are simply individual spectators. However, as in the case of *The Artist Is Present*, the sense of community within the audiences is raised through fully embodied experience of the performance. While the sense of subjectivity and idiosyncrasy did not entirely evaporate, the large body of spectators engaged in a similar, affective encounter shaped a unified group (Duggan 2007: 53-56).

*The Artist Is Present*, the silent ballad of Abramović and the reenactments of the past works, present the story of the artist with a simple narrative. The phenomena mentioned throughout this chapter are merged, grew and intensified in the retrospective. Considering the physical pain and endurance, the qualities of long-durational art, aesthetic experience, debates on preservation of performance art, energy exchange and artist's physical and psychic presence through performance studies' composite perspective will provide profound insights into the performance. Exploring the significant position of Abramović in the performance art field and the effects of her achievements on the progress of the art form, will also introduce us the capability and resilience of the term "performance" and the endless possibilities within it. This performance can be considered as the composition of all the elements that the artists' performances have constructed upon. Gaining a wider perspective on the major issues that Abramović dealt with throughout her extensive performance art

career prepares us to dissect the main principles that lie beneath the retrospective. *Artist Is Present* is not only the retrospective of Abramović's art but rather it portrays a long period of the Performance Art, therefore it is significant to realize how the performance medium, the art form, is transformed through the conversation that is created between the bodies in the exhibition.



## CHAPTER 4

### AFFECTIVE ENCOUNTERS IN THE ARTIST IS PRESENT

#### 4.1 Affect the Ineffable

A vast number of disciplinary and interdisciplinary areas of study pay significant attention to the term *affect*. It gains a certain value within a broad range of disciplinary context including cultural studies, feminist theory, queer theory, psychology and neuroscience. In order to explore economic, political and cultural tendencies and to understand the way of their conceptualization in thought, critical theory concentrates on *affect*. The semiotic and semantic analysis can be considered neglected with their approach to *images* only in terms of their relation to *language* and process images in relation to their symbolic quality. Affect theory allows us to escape from the exhausted ideas of structuralist and post-structuralist thought that have been dominated cultural theory (Hemmings, 2005: 554). Massumi (2002: 27) pointed out that linguistics, logic, narratology, or ideology, are prone to miss the sense and expression of *event* due to these fields' emphasis on structure. On the other

hand, the *expression-event*, which is a phrase that can be explained with the inexplicable, represents the unrepresentable structures. With the growing interest to the affect theory especially within the humanities area, a whole new train of thought on our meaning making mechanisms emerged:

Affectivity is a way of thinking of life without a recourse to meaning: before there are concepts and sign systems, there are non-conscious bodily responses that enable a being to make its way in world, and to form primary differentiations from which meaning (as systematized and repeatable) will be possible (Colebrook 2010: 32).

*Affect* has been becoming central to media, literacy and art theory to examine the information and image based late capitalist environment and the way master narratives are processed. Specifically with Gilles Deleuze's reinvention of *affect*, the term started to gain several philosophical connotations in visual, cultural and art theory.

The growing attention to affect studies raises questions on the reasons behind this focus on this term in this particular time. Patricia Clough (2007: 1) defines this increased attention as a shift in thought and names it as *the affective turn*. The affective turn, or the sense of a new era that is following up the epoch of brain and cognitive systems, arises as a revolution in a history of Western thought, which is centered around the man as a source of reason and knowledge. This vital turn opposes the belief that the world can be experienced, known and sensed through rationale and language (Colebrook, 2010: 30). In the early mid-1990s, humanities and social sciences across a number of disciplinary and interdisciplinary discourses has been witnessing an *affective turn* and like the other turns that academic fields have experienced in recent decades, such as the linguistic turn and the cultural turn,

the focus on affects strengthen and broaden some of the most productive existing trends in research (Davis, 2008: I). The affective turn invites a transdisciplinary approach to theory and method, which requires experimentation in realizing the changing functions of the political, the economic, the cultural, or what Massumi defines as the social. This turn can be considered a response to the limitations of post-structuralism and deconstruction, because both were so strict in the pronouncement of the death of the subject, and therefore had little to do with affect and emotion (Terada, 2003).

The turn to affect in critical theory and cultural criticism provides the opportunity for an expansive exploration, precisely because the cultural critics and critical theorists engaged with affect have treated it both in terms of what is empirically realized and in terms of the philosophical conception of the virtual. The major preliminary studies for affective turn are the focus on the body, which is visible mostly in feminist research, and the exploration of emotions that is widely covered in queer theory (Clough, 2007: ix-xii). As one of the most prominent areas that benefit from the affective turn, the academic work that focuses on body and its relation to *affect* has been studied for decades. As Baruch Spinoza, whose ideas on affect being preliminary for other contemporary work in this field suggested, the mind's power to think and its developments are parallel to the body's power to act. Spinoza adds that there is a correlation between the power to act and the power to be affected:

The mind's power to think corresponds to its receptivity to external ideas; and the body's power to act corresponds to its sensitivity to other bodies. The greater our power to be affected, he posits, the greater our power to act (Clough, 2007: x).

Throughout this chapter the corporeal reactions that affects engender and their way to challenge body's and art's capabilities will be examined in relation to Marina Abramović's performance that she did as a part of her first retrospective, *The Artist Is Present*. Although the presence of the abundant research on the artist's contribution on performance art, affect theory's way to consider Abramović's body of work might transform our perspective on Abramović's art and the way *affects* grow in art. *Affect* creates an area that thoughts and senses may reconcile and are transformed into an ethical, aesthetic, and political task. In their canonical book *What is Philosophy* (1994: 164) Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari assigned art a sacred position and claimed that art is the only thing that is preserved and can preserve. And added, what it preserves is "bloc of sensations, compound of percept and affects." In this respect, *affect* leads us to a more comprehensive understanding on how Abramović's presence builds a structure that the senses and thinking processes of the viewers merge and together, raise another perspective on the viewer's presences within the art context.

Before focusing on *The Artist Is Present* and the performance's power to integrate affect and experience, I would like to clarify these terms and their connection with Deleuze's thinking schemes. For Deleuze, affect emerges in between the body and skin, past and future, expectation and suspense, action and reaction, happiness and sadness, quiescence and arousal, passivity and activity (Massumi 2002: 33). Affect is a complex spiritual entity, and the space of conjunctions, meetings and divisions that are rooted in the present (Deleuze, 1986: 108). Affect happens in the emergence points of these resonating levels and not directly accessible to experience; at the same time it is not transcendent and it is not exactly outside of experience. Instead,

affect is always immanent to experience and it is always synesthetic, that is the participation of the senses in each other. The limits of one's potential interaction are determined by her ability to transform the effects of one sensory mode into those of another (Thrift, 2008: 16). Although we can now define an affective turn in the contemporary thought, the definition of affect remain open and ungeneralizable from the view of myriad perspectives. This multifaceted approach to affect reflects the ambiguity, open-endedness and sloppiness of the affect theory as well.

As in Abramović's performance, in affect, there is a junction of the senses in each other and the potential interactions between those senses has an ability to transform the effects of one sensory mode into another. Affect takes form and gains openness as a result of this interaction (Massumi 2002a, 35). In addition, Massumi (2002b, 65) highlighted the capabilities of *affect*: "affect allows us to think of the human in terms of what surpasses it, undermines it, fragments it, but also in terms of what simultaneously supports it, energizes it and holds it together". Affect arises in the core of in between-ness; in the capacity to act and be acted upon. Affect is the passage of forces, intensities and resonances, which circulate between bodies:

Affect, at its most anthropomorphic, is the name we give to the forces-visceral forces beneath, alongside, or generally *other than* conscious knowing, vital forces insisting beyond emotion-that can serve to drive us toward movement, toward thought and extension, that can likewise suspend us (as if in neutral) across a barely registering accretion of force-relations, or that can even leave us overwhelmed by the world's apparent intractability (Gregg and Seigworth, 2010: 1).

*The Artist Is Present* is a performance that constructs its meaning upon the process rather than the subject matter, which is the physical presence of the artist and the participants. This type of understanding changes the criteria of the art criticism.

Rather than focusing on art's capacity to exhibit predefined conditions and symptomologies, we become able to highlight art's ability to capture the lived experience. In other words, the performance is not about the "aboutness" of the art but about its process (Bennett, 2005: 9).

*The Artist Is Present* becomes one of the biggest cultural events of its time, mostly because of the participants' cathartic, or more truly, *affective* reaction as crying. In order to solve the mystery behind the tears of Abramović and the spectators, and relying on *affect*'s power to shed light on the performance, I believe that explaining how affect is being differentiated from identification processes and emotions is crucial. Shaviro (2010: 3) drew a line between emotions and affects:

Affect is primary, non-conscious, asubjective, presubjective, asignifying, unqualified, and intensive; on the other hand emotion is derivative, conscious, qualified, and meaningful. Subjects are overwhelmed and transversed by affect but have or possess their own emotions.

The terms *affect*, *feeling* and *emotion* are frequently used interchangeably in social sciences and there is lack of clarity and consistency in the way those terms are explained and used. Their slipperiness is echoed in different ways in which feelings are merged into the affective communication. Feeling is mostly used to refer to phenomenological or subjective experience, where affect is defined as a force of non-conscious and non-linguistic experience of intensity (Pahl 2009: 549). Affects surpass the individual realm through emotions, which are culturally recognisable and provide a unity, stability and coherence to the felt element to our relational encounters. Feelings exhibit the intensive forces as subjective experience where affects performatively integrate these culturally normative patterns through expression, movement or speech. Here the term *feeling* is used to illustrate our

awareness that affects have triggered, whereas *emotion* describes the combination of the things that affect have triggered as they are the recollection of our thoughts and sensorial memories from the previous experiences of that affect (Nathanson 2008: xiv).

Affect cannot be explained as a thing, an element or a substance, but rather it is a process that produces bodies that are open to other bodies, human and non-human, and are unfinished rather than stable entities (Blackman and Cromby 2007:5-6). In other words, affect is not a characteristic of emotion or expression of individuals, but it is characterized as being a subject to sensation (Wu 2009: 70). Massumi (2002a: 217) proposed a delicate statement for understanding how emotions and affects are distinguished:

Reserve the term 'emotion' for the personalized content, and affect for the continuation. Emotion is contextual. Affect is situational: eventfully ingressive to context. Serially so: affect is trans-situational. As processual as it is precessual, affect inhabits the passage. It is pre- and postcontextual, pre- and postpersonal, an excess of continuity invested only in the ongoing: its own. Self-continuity across the gaps. Impersonal affect is the connecting thread of experience. It is the invisible glue that holds the world together. In event. The world-glue of event of an autonomy of event-connection continuing across its own serialized capture in context.

Affect is a transformative force and is itself a process of change, and with its reframing ability, it goes beyond the limits of the consciously retrieved emotions. Affect is involved in and at the same time distinct from, feelings and emotions. Although affects play a significant role in the formation of feelings and emotions, they still considered as distinct: affects are discrete and innate, where emotions are more complicated and personal (Thomson and Biddle 2013: 7-8). The statement of Parco Blankas (2010), who sat with Marina Abramović over ten times during the

exhibition period, illustrates the ineffability of affect and how affects flows through the performance:

I think Marina's piece has a very strong magnetism. It's hard to explain but it's almost like you feel this force, it draws you in, like a magnet. Sitting with her is a transforming experience—it's luminous, it's uplifting, it has many layers, but it always comes back to being present, breathing, maintaining eye contact. It's an amazing journey to be able to experience and participate in the piece. She almost acts as a catalyst.

In art, when the subject matter enters to the representational area, it is vulnerable to appropriation, reduction and mimicry. It only becomes the deposit of primary experience. However this may not be the case for performance art since it gains its power from the interpersonal transmission of experience. For instance, in mainstream cinema, feeling the lived experience or establishing an empathic connection with the character is relatively straightforward. The spectator sees the characters do or feel something and she automatically creates an emotional response. On the contrary, in contemporary art, this type of emphatic connection is seen as neither possible nor functional. In the case of contemporary art, specifically starting with the proliferation of body art, viewers do not encounter or even seek a character that they can readily identify with. Artist's experience is not in the scope of spectatorship's interest or related with artworks' context. In other words, in performance art, the affective responses are not established by emotional identification or sympathy, as in happens between the screen and spectator. Brecht claims that this type of identification is rooted in a crude empathy and in affective art there is no place for such kind of passive and automatic identification processes. The voyeur becomes the participant, and abandons the emphatic sharing and gets involved with the contagion of affects.



In other words, affect cannot be explained with identification and it does not attach to characters, rather, it arises in spaces (Bennett, 2005: 13-14).

As in the case of Abramović's work, in contemporary art and performance art the affective reactions emerge from the direct engagement with sensation as it is registered in the work. Understanding the difference between the emotional responses that are created with identification and sympathy, and direct engagement with sensation, helps us see how affective operations of art are active, progressive and transformative. Exploring the transactive nature of performance art, rather than relying on its communicative power, we need to examine how affect is produced within and through the work and how the audience experiences it. *The Artist Is Present* dissociates *affective encounter* from emotional identification and heightens the capacity for transforming perception. Abramović and the participants are captured in the flows of *affect*, which is a synonym for *force* and *forces of encounter* (Bennett 2005: 2). These forces can only exist by confronting other forces; they do not have a center, instead they appear as a reflection of other forces that they affect or be affected by (Deleuze 1989: 139). *Affect*, does not flow in the interaction between two bodies, which are nothing but forces. Rather, as Massumi articulated (2011: 112) affective attunement is transindividual and it occurs *in-between*. Massumi invented a term, an intensive level of organization, as "excluded middle" to highlight the in-betweenness of where affect arises: "it is the third state between activity and passivity, occupying the gap between content and effect" (Thompson and Biddle 2013: 6).

## 4.2 The Mystery Behind Tears

The performance functions as a catalyst to invoke an embodied experience, which creates a visceral response, as crying. In *Pictures and Tears* (2001: 29-38), James Elkins presented the complexities of understanding the act of crying within a broad context of art. He illustrates the crying phenomenon by touching upon different art works within a wide range of art movements. For instance, he mentioned visitors' cathartic responses to *Rothko's Chapel* (1971) and a woman's intimate testimony about the *Winged Victory of Samothrace* (c. 220-185 BC). Throughout the book he presented numerous theories and refers to the history of tears yet he still claims that there is certain mystery behind the act of crying. Elkins attempts to protect tears' mysterious sense and highlights the inexplicable nature of crying. He stated that (2004: 38), "tears belong to a twilight tribe of thoughts feelings so dim we hardly know them". Although the reason beneath the tears can be tied to several factors, he accentuates the wisdom in not searching for a singular explanation or truth and can enjoy the state of not knowing or never knowing. With the whole mystery behind them, Elkins accepts tears as a strong witness for showing something has happened and they are "the best visible evidence that person has been deeply moved" (Elkins 2004: 38).

Elkins also addressed the matter of timelessness and how the sense of duration and time evokes the crying reaction.<sup>22</sup> Elkins suggested that paintings have a unique capacity to break into to our sense of time, disrupt the movement of the clock and

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<sup>22</sup> Besides the ideas of Elkins on crying, Teresa Brennan's definition of *affective transmission* or *contagion of affects* can help us explore how the collective crying reaction spread to the masses. Brennan, Teresa. *The Transmission of Affect*. Ithaca: Cornell U. P., 2004.

simply making time stop. He claimed that visual art has a potential to highlight or recreate the moments where we feel the pace of time and when we see it freezes. He added (2004: 133): “a painting on the theme of time can be like a hand that reaches out and suddenly stops the clock, or pushes the hour hand forward, or spins it back around the dial”. The participants of *The Artist Is Present* said that the experience could be equated with being out of time; they saw time stopped and disappeared.<sup>23</sup> Regarding these statements, we might say that Abramović in a way functions as a “painting” for the participants and has a tremendous power to play with their sense of time and opens a new space for them to get lost and experience the ineffable.

The motor-reactions, physical system of human functioning and cognitive skills are distinct but not separate from affects. These drives interact with affects and indeed affects have power to shape them (Thompson and Biddle, 2013: 8). There is a continuous circulation of affects in the outer world through their interaction with motor reactions:

Affects are not private, obscure, internal, intestinal responses, but facial responses that communicate and motivate at once both publically outward to the other and backward and inward to the one whole smiles or cries or frowns or sneers or otherwise expresses his affects (Tomkins 1966: 249)

In *The Artist Is Present* the shared gaze is the presenter of affects and the face has certain significance in the transmission of affects. Tomkins (2008: 359) stated that, face is the primary site of affective reactions. Those affective responses reflect a certain affective state and through revealed in a face, they are also capable to reveal empathetic affective responses in others. Affect does not only function within the private and closed site of the body and it does not function on the inexplicable

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<sup>23</sup> See Appendix I.

autonomic and visceral responses. Rather these basic affects exceed the individual site and reach the bodied of others and again turn back to themselves. Thompson and Biddle (2013: 8) referred to the ideas of Tomkins on face as a ground for the exhibiting and transmitting affects:

The face is not just expressive of affect, the outcome of affect, but is embedded within the affective process, as a producer and reproducer of feeling.

Affect is revealed through flowing between bodies and spaces, as in the case of crying reaction, it cannot be explained with a single subject matter or cannot reside within a single subject (Bennett 2005: 13). The one affective power drifts through the other: the capacity of a body to affect and to be affected shapes and is shaped by the ways in which it affects and is affected by other bodies. Affect is depended both on the capacity to act and to the sense of vitality that connects one's desires to connect and engage with the desires and ideas of others. It constitutes a certain intensity of sensual, emotional and embodied experience (Thompson, 2009: 120). Therefore, as a polysemic performance work, *The Artist Is Present's* main intention is not to communicate a singular meaning or to promote a definite reaction but to maintain sensation. So, the question here is how can Abramović's work become available for critical thinking or theoretical perspective if she created something to maintain sensation beyond consciousness or intellect?

#### **4.3 Affect: Path to Deep Thought**

Deleuze created the term, *encountered sign*, which is a sign that is felt, rather than recognized or perceived through cognition. This actually does not mean that feelings can be considered separate from the critical inquiry. For Deleuze, affect is a powerful trigger for deep thought because of the way it grasps us, forcing us to engage

involuntarily: “More important than thought there is what leads to thought. Impressions, which force us to look, encounters, which force us to interpret, expressions, which force us to think” (Bennett 2005: 7).

Deleuze’s emphasis on the path goes to thought, rather than the thought itself shows similarities between Abramović’s approach to art object and art process.<sup>24</sup> *The Artist Is Present* reaches the participants through their senses and turned the artist to an *encountered sign*. From Deleuze’s perspective, art is considered an embodiment of sensation and it functions as a catalyst for thought. In *The Affect Theory Reader* (2010: 3), Melissa Gregg and Gregory Seigworth also pointed out to the *affect*’s close connection to thought and refers Freud’s early ideas on affect:

Freud believed that the passages of affect persist in immediate adjacency to the movements of thought close enough that sensate tendrils constantly extend between unconscious (or, better, non-conscious) affect and conscious thought. In practice, then, affect and cognition are never fully separable-if for no other reason than that thought is itself a body, embodied.

Affective responses that are engendered with the performances like *The Artist Is Present*, cannot be simplified as a generator of emotional or sentimental reaction, but they also provoke thought and have a critical function. Thanks to that characteristic of art, it is not restricted with a single understanding; rather, it is open to engender infinite thoughts and new conversations. In this regard, my intention is to see where

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<sup>24</sup> Marina Abramović also accentuated the importance of process rather than the final result in the performance frequently. She stated that “The performance is a process. The public as well as the artist hasn’t go into it. They must meet in a completely new territory, and build from that timeless time spent together. That’s very important. Because you need that time so that something can really happen as a performer.” Marina Abramović, Chris Thompson, Katarina Weslien. “Pure Raw: Performance, Pedagogy and (Re)presentation” (*A Journal of Performance and Art* 82, vol: 28, 2006), 29-50.

affect leads *The Artist Is Present* while not to encapsulate or to limit the work only with that perspective.

One of the most prominent aspects about the *The Artist Is Present* that adds significance to the work is its controversial reception. Abramović disrupts the conventional framework of spectatorship, problematizes the role of the spectator in the performance, assigns a responsibility to them and breaks the passive state of spectatorship (Goldberg, 2011: 165-243). In addition to the instantaneous crying reaction, there is a large coverage in art blogs and journals that involve various commentaries on the work. Even though human memory has a capacity to remember certain emotions, the way they felt cannot be retrieved. Although, those memories that belong to affective connections cannot be retrieved, they are revivable; the situation that creates those emotions can produce new set of emotions (Bennett, 2005: 22). Therefore, affects create a real time corporeal experience and because of their power to produce these bodily responses, affects cannot be confined with verbal, semantic and linguistic representations. When the performance finishes and the spectator leaves the space, despite the absence of the work, the reception of it constitutes the performance's presence. The reception of *The Artist Is Present* is highly parallel to Abramović's objectives. The spectator's reviews are not to reproduce the experience of the performance, but instead they restage and restate the experience by using their own set of associations, and through that creation they access and present affects and blocs of sensations (Phelan, 1993: 149). This type of performative conception of seeing proves the dynamic relationship between the artist and the viewer, who are engaged within the complex operations of representation, presentation, projections, identifications and affective engagements (Jones , 1999: 1)

As in the case of Abramović's performance, Deleuze suggests that the conception of art is not associated with the aim of reproducing the world; instead, it embodies affect. More specifically, Deleuze and Guattari suggest, "affect is neither abstractly formal and universal, nor emotively located in specific bodies and times; rather affects and percepts are capacities of bodies released from bodies" (Colebrook, 2010: 123). The flow of affects, that travels through bodies reveals the performative quality of seeing and reception. The notion of performative relates to the open-ended characteristic of interpretation, which has to be considered a process rather than an act with a certain goal.

The reason behind my attempt to explore Abramović's performance practice in conjunction with the theory of affect lies beneath in the characteristics of the performance art medium. In performance art, there is a strong correlation between affect and immediate experience. They are fundamental aspects of the dynamics between the artwork and the spectator. Performance art opens a space where the spectator can experience and witness her own feelings. The flow of affects that are generated in the bodies of both the audience and the artist is not the mediators of feelings, but subject to sensation. This process creates a "seeing-truth" rather than a "thinking-truth", which means that the spectator registers the experience and also the memory of experience in a level of bodily affect. The phrase of "seeing truth" has a specific role in dissecting *The Artist Is Present*: "vision has a crucial place in affective experience, and especially to experience that cannot be spoken as it is felt. The eye can often function as a mute witness by means of which events register as eidetic memory images imprinted with sensation" (Colebrook, 2010: 123). Here, the

term event signifies something other than its regular usage. In *The Artist Is Present*, waiting in the line, seeing other participants' reactions, sitting still facing the artist and more than anything else *crying* itself becomes the event itself. Event, according to Deleuze, is happening rather than being a thing, verb rather than noun, process rather than substance. Event is defined as the becoming itself, which is the deepest dimension of Being. Within the context of the *event*, the artist is the presenter of sensations, and with her engagement with the medium, sensations are created in the present moment. Deleuzian understanding of art, which is open to affects, exhibits a transmission from expression to production, from object to process and at the end sensation becomes less subject matter than method of operation and conveys the idea of becoming.

Performance art has its own history of dealing with the senses and it unifies process and affect through posing the body to the arena of pain and endurance. Abramović, who is a queen of pain and endurance, presents her body to sensation and stimulate affective reaction in the viewer. This connection between the artist and the viewer can only be processed viscerally, which may explain the viewer's corporeal response to the performance. In *The Artist Is Present*, the silent and solid gaze of the artist and her mute body, appear as a site of affective engagement for the viewer and reminds the viewer of his own vitality, sense of aliveness and changeability, an in a way establishes non-conscious self-perception. Abramović is transformed into a site that affects can flow through bodies and the contemplation of seeing. Her gaze, her presence and her role as an artist are shadowed. The act of seeing turns into a "seeing feeling, which is an area that feeling is created and regenerated through an encounter with the artwork" (Colebrook, 2010: 41).



Performance is a form of *deterritorialization* and of infinite *becomings*, a process that makes possible for openness to the other, to *in-betweenness*. In the works of Abramović, the idea of in-betweenness has a crucial place because in-betweenness is the state that one is able to be open, be vulnerable to changes, to new ideas. Through this state, the space gets intensified and the infinite possibilities are emerged. Becomings are the processes that organized forms and structures are melded and become intensities, affects and flows. Becoming is the nature of being itself. In the state of becomings and plane of immanence, everything connects to each other and forms another possible combinations. Performance is a source of producing news way of interpersonal and intrapersonal connections and becomings, and at the end, performance transforms us (Bernstein, 2005). This transformation breaks the voyeuristic stance of the spectatorship and restores the artistic experience where we can get in touch with ourselves as embodied beings, who can only know the world through affects and senses. In *The Artist Is Present* Abramović, seeks to engage the viewer through senses, introduce them the state of becoming. Accordingly, the sharing of ideas, energies and feelings that raise the power of aesthetic experience in the performance happens in this state of in-betweenness.

The haunting power of Abramović's performance is enclosed in the setting of MoMA's atrium, which almost functions as a boxing ring, a stage or a screen more than a performance area, which is to allow transcendent experience. In MoMA, as one of the most institutionalized modern art museums, there are 4 giant lights, set up to the each corner of the square where in the middle of it Abramović deeply looking into the eyes of a stranger. There is also a significant amount of noise that may

distract participants from the focus of looking and although the performance exhibits a quasi-religious scene, due to the physical setting, it also simulates a sense of a concert hall. In the performance, the sense of privacy is shattered with a square, where the artist and a viewer is located, because of the trail of media, onlookers and others waiting their turn to sit across the artist on the borders of the square. The participants created the sense of glamorous event rather than opening up a space for affective encounters. With the help of the setting, a photographer who take the portraits of each participant and the artist constantly, MoMA's status in art and the large coverage about the exhibition have a strong power to shatter the performance's power to create affects, percepts and blocs of sensation. Amelia Jones, as one of the most important performance art scholars of her time and a close friend of Abramović, stated that the performance while aiming to build a statue of presence, actually destroys presence. Jones (2011: 18) has highlighted the distracting features of the exhibition space and continued:

I found the exchange to be anything but energizing, personal or transformative. Though I felt aware that the person I have met and whom I respect as an artist and cultural force was sitting there before me, I primarily felt myself the object of myriad individual and photographic gazes (including hers), and the experience overall was very strongly one of participating in a spectacle — not an emotionally or energetically charged interpersonal relation, but a simulation of relational exchange with others (not just the artist, but the other spectators, the guards, the “managers” of the event). For me this felt like an inadvertent parody of the structure of authentic expression and reception of “true” emotional resonance that modernist art discourse (brought to its apotheosis in institutions such as MoMA) so long claimed for modernist painting and sculpture.

However, there is an alternative and more accessible way to approach to the formal setting of the performance: an art critic Alisa Solomon (2010) presented a refreshing perspective on the long waiting line for sharing a reciprocal gaze with Abramović in the exhibition space. She explained how Abramović by being radically present

herself, invited the visitors to be present to each other. There is a concentrated state of observance that is shared between the visitors waiting in the queue. Through fully concentrating their attention collectively in an extended period of time a calm, collaborative and meditative clarity is emerged. In this respect, she put *The Artist Is Present* apart from the other museum experiences she had and claimed that unlike other popular exhibits where you have to crunch under someone's arm to take a quick look at an artwork, the bright square in MoMA's atrium was turned into a space of contemplation. The visitors in the waiting line shared the same space for a long time, tried to decode the artist's way of acting as a catalyst for other visitor's cathartic reaction, exchanged views on the exhibition and aimlessly formed an enclosed community. She then realized an unexpected silence in the queue, her breathing slowed down and felt in rhythm with the others she was waiting with. The connection between them as well as with the performance was magnified. Following this, it is not hard to notice that Abramović created a unique space for reaching a collective sense of self-scrutiny, as the visitors shared patience, silence, commitment and concentration. Fisher (2012: 153) also trailed the connection between the contribution of the visitor who waited in the line to participate in the piece, and the performance's affective quality. The aesthetic engagement, which is perceived in the form of tangible forces, feeling and relationships established between the visitors in the almost never-ending waiting line.

Therefore, it is reasonable to think that, the distractive elements in the performance not necessarily blocked the vast amount of ecstatic reactions toward the

performance,<sup>25</sup> which leads us to consider other physical and affective essences of the work. Deleuze (1983: 88) in *Cinema I*, refers to the correlation between affection-image and close-up technique in cinema, which I believe, directly ties to the physical setting in Abramović's performance. Face is portrayed as a receptive, immobile surface and also as a reflecting and reflected unity in Deleuze's canonical book in the film theory. The face, in itself is already defined as a close-up and as a zone of affects. Affect is revealed in subtle movements or even immobility of the face that we see on the screen in close-up (Deleuze, 1986: 88). Through the physical characteristics of close-up images, the spectator sees the subject as detached from its original environment and is decontextualized. Basically, face is transformed into a field that we can openly pose questions such as; what are you thinking about, what is bothering you and what do you sense. These questions that preserve and transmit wonder, may take a place in the participants' silent dialogue with Abramović, who turns into a phantom with the effect of close-up gaze and haunts the spectator (Deleuze, 1986: 99).

The other element that may support to create the bloc of sensations and affects is defined in *What is Philosophy?* Deleuze and Guattari highlight one circumstance for an artwork to be open to the possibilities of direct connection, solid and independent: void. Void is essential for viewers to reach and breathe in the artwork; blocs need emptiness to breathe, to become sensations (Deleuze and Guattari 2011: 618). During the second month of the exhibition, Abramović decides to change the original setting of the exhibition and remove the table between her and the participant. The artist believes that this decision transformed the transcendent experience and

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<sup>25</sup> Selection from the most common reactions to the performance and exhibition can be seen in the Appendix I.

intensity the affective encounter. With the new setting the piece becomes more sensible for Abramović and it gets closer to her lifetime intention to explore the possibilities of an immaterial art. The removal of the table also removes all the obstacles and helps the work to reach a deeper level (Abramović, 2010). So we can conclude that, with the removal of the table the sense of *void* heightens which affects rise through.

Deleuze and Guattari portray artists and their roles close to a magician, who have unique abilities to invent and present *affects* and *percepts* in any type of situation. An artist according to the canonical philosophers, is the seer and the becomer; she goes beyond perceptual states and affective transitions of the lived and transforms them into *percepts* and *affects*. She dwells on the present moment and highlights the *here-and-now* by saturating what happens in that particular instant. Through the power of *here-and-now*, artist introduces us with the state of *becoming*, which is not a moment of imitation, sympathy or identification of transformation, but the act of passing from one to another. *Becoming* creates blocs of sensations. *Becomings* are the deterritorialization of consistent and organized entities. Through this process, these organized structures are transformed into immanent, pure intensities, affects and flows. For Deleuze, becoming is the pure state and nature of being itself, for him, there is nothing but *becoming*. *The Artist Is Present*, despite its contradictory status, becomes one of the most distinguished performance art pieces of the 21<sup>st</sup> century art particularly with its reception. In this case, what is really crucial is the way the piece is contributed to the performance art studies in conjunction with *the affective turn* rather than taking the exact shape of divine, *affective art* which Deleuze and Guattari portrays persistently. Marina Abramović's performance creates a discourse where

*bodily presence, becoming, affect, duration* and the act *crying* coincide, and reveals the art's power to create percepts, affects and blocs of sensations. Massumi (2001: 26) stated that "art excites affectivity" and Abramović's art, which has close ties to the quotidian, gives rise to form of lives nourished from affects, and releases all kinds of potentiality in human being. Phelan (2004a: 27) puts an emphasis on the artist's performances with the way they are rooted in the core of life: "We can call it performance, we can call it presence, or we can call it time. But in the end it is life." *The Artist Is Present*, opens a space for deep affective encounters and creates a transcendent dialogue on how art invades life as well as how life invades art, as none of the performance piece in the recent decade can do. Phelan's (2004a: 27) insightful comment on the strong bond between performance and life fully reveals Abramović's stance in performance art and the source of the plain affective transmission in *The Artist Is Present*: "It breathes, it sweats, it ends. It begins again. It passes from you to me. It asks strangers to become witnesses. It trusts. It builds. It rests. It tries. It might be happening now right in front of our eyes."

## CHAPTER 5

### CONCLUSION

Marina Abramović has witnessed the birth and the golden age of performance art. Since the 1960s, she has been actively involved in the progress of this thought and sense-provoking medium. She both exhibits and shapes the major transitions in the performance art sphere. As we have gone through her abundant art career, the significant idea shifts throughout the medium's progress have become apparent. The artist's retrospective *The Artist Is Present* (2010) at the Museum of Modern Art has been accepted as a milestone in the celebration of performance art. The firsthand experience alongside the large media coverage of the exhibition and the synchronized documentation from the live performance has raised the awareness about the existence and effect of the performance art.<sup>26</sup> Moreover, the retrospective set questions the problem of preserving and documenting performance art and the

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<sup>26</sup> *Artforum* dedicated two essays to the exhibition during the period it was exhibited in MoMA: Carrie Lambert-Beatty, "Against Performance Art," *Artforum* 48, no. 9 (May 2010): 208–212; and Caroline Jones, "Staged Presence," *Artforum* 48, no. 9 (May 2010): 214–219. Amelia Jones wrote a critical article on the impossibility of presence in the contemporary performance art: "'The Artist Is Present': Artistic Re-enactments and the Impossibility of Presence," *TDR/The Drama Review* 55, no. 1 (Spring 2011): 16–45.

ethics of seeing the live performance event. Especially with her decision to use young performance artists and performers to enact her early pieces, a discussion on Abramović's method to encapsulate the *presence* of the performance was stimulated. The artist's awareness and control on her own historicity, provoked spectators and art theorists to question if Abramović's "authoritative" approach to regulate the audience experience is parallel to the utopian promises of performance: to root the audiences into the present. To decide on whether Abramović succeeded in realizing this promise of the performance art or degraded the art form's capacity to provide an unmediated way to communicate with the live event would be unproductive and unfair to the whole field. Rather I tried to explore in what ways Abramović challenged and transformed the performance art medium and enhanced the spectators' own aesthetic experiences.

*The Artist Is Present*, one of the longest durational pieces in the art history, explores the spectators' way to communicate with the performance piece. It proposes a grounded way of experiencing the artwork as opposed to being simply overwhelmed or intruded upon by the artist's and other viewer's presence, or without needing to work through all the connotations of the artwork. *The Artist Is Present*, as consistent with the rest of the artists' career, requires an active contribution of the spectator in the form of his or her unique experience. Abramović's own experience is merged with the spectators' experience, the distinction between the artist and the spectator becomes transparent. Together they shape a collective, shared experience. The individual tone of the artistic experience is shattered by seeing and joining the expressions of others. *The Artist Is Present* itself is an expression in the form of a performance. It is a cultural and collective expression that heightens the participants'



experiences. Abramović, with her quiet yet captivating presence, proposed an active, progressive and fluctuating experience. This intense experience, provided in the performance, presents an exciting path to engage with the art.

The Artist Is Present carries certain significance as a long-durational art piece in the hyper-mediated postmodern living environment. The unmediated gaze that she provided in long periods shattered a tradition in the 21<sup>st</sup> century art. The exhausted and impatient way of experiencing a contemporary work was transformed into a contemplative and quiet way of seeing or more truly seeing. The corporeal traces in the performance were intensified by the powers of the quotidian art experience that Abramović presented. As Bernstein (2005) emphasized, time and durational experience intensifies and deepens the experience of the performance. The Artist Is Present is rooted in the idea of contemplation, presence and here and now in order to convey the meditative state of perceptual and mental transformation that performance confirms through its long-term harmony.

Abramović's stance in performance art demonstrates the major transitions in the performance sphere; it witnesses and contributes the changes that the *performative turn* generated. During the 1960s everyday objects started to be included in the artworks and intruded into the viewer's space while at the same time the art movements such as Fluxus and Happenings, and other forms of performance art privileged the interaction between the art viewers and the art object. This type of interaction, where the physical activity was necessary to communicate with the

artwork, was also a part of pop art and conceptual art works.<sup>27</sup> In the last two decades artists have been creating new mediums and new strategies to engage and stimulate the viewer's body with the senses of smell, sight, sound and touch. As a consequence of this active interaction, the viewer's awareness of the meaning making processes in the act of art *viewing* heightened. But most importantly, the spectator's perception of the *real life* experiences has transformed and fused into the atmosphere of the art world. The performative turn foresees contemporary art's desire to arouse the whole body through the interactive processes, which enables new social practices. What is meant by interactivity here is a synesthetic experience in perceiving the artworks: the viewer's whole body experience can grow with freedom to be fully engaged with the art event (Brodsky 2002: 101-102). This transition in the ways of *seeing* the art invites a broad range of senses into this active involvement with the art event. In order to decode the art piece, the engagement of the different senses in art is required. This synesthetic and kinaesthetic form of engagement with the artwork that the performative turn witnesses and constitutes, privileges the creation of viewer's own unique experience of the art event. *The Artist Is Present*, where the participants were physically in motion in order to access the aesthetic experience, embraced this active, embodying and bearing form of art viewing.

In the case of *The Artist Is Present*, aesthetics, as a criterion for reaching, analyzing and understanding the artwork, is embedded in the experience and it surpasses its ability to explain the artwork. With its embracing nature, the aesthetic experience enhances the quality of the artwork and becomes a tool for the affective transmission between the spectator's body and the artwork. In order to reveal the power of

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<sup>27</sup> See Claes Oldenberg's *Ice Bag* (1969-1971) and Marcel Broothaers's *The Visual Tower* (1966)

aesthetic experience in *The Artist Is Present*, I have mainly used John Dewey's and Victor Turner's theory of art as experience, as they both find the source of aesthetic experience in the mundane, ordinary daily life situations and see it as a way for us to connect to natural and social aesthetic form. Through this form of experience we gain an understanding to appreciate what is already available and considered ordinary. This understanding that accepts raw living moments as the main parameter for embodied art resonates with the promises of *Artist Is The Present*: it merges an everyday event and aesthetic experience, and attributes the *specific power*<sup>28</sup> of the performance to its emphasis on being present. Abramović's bold statement on the presence is highlighted in her latest performance where she explicitly invites her spectators to join her in the ritual of the presence. The participants of the performance experienced an act, neither extraordinary nor sublime, they only shared a simple, pure gaze in a long duration, in which intensifies the sense of presence, and the affective capacity of the work is immediately heightened.

The possibility of the realization of an affective encounter in the midst of *The Artist Is Present*, lead us to the affect theory or in Massumi's (2002a: 27) terms, the theory of the intensities. As a way to perceive the way affect is becoming central in the contemporary thought, Clough (2007: 1) introduced us *the affective turn*: it is a raised interest to the connection between *bodies* and the fluctuations of feelings that shape the experience in ways that both effect and get away from the conscious knowing. Here, the concept of body, is used in its broadest sense, as Thompson and Biddle (2013: 9) stated, body is a dynamic collaboration of the relations that is defined by its affective quality, that is to affect and to be affected. In the pursuit of

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<sup>28</sup> Deleuze believed that each art form has its own unique power and performance has a superior ability in conveying meaning through affects (Colebrook, 2002: 24).

providing a “cultural-theoretical vocabulary specific to affect”, which Massumi (2002a: 27) pointed out the lack of, I have mostly referred to the works of contemporary affect theory that elaborate on the ideas of Deleuze and Guattari (Brian Massumi, Patricia Clough, Gregory Seigworth and Melissa Gregg, Clara Hemmings, Simon O’Sullivan), and Silvan Tomkins (Eve Kosofsky Segdwick and Adam Frank). Affect theory is an overreaching entity: there are various definitions and different theoretical approaches and disciplinary backgrounds in it. In this thesis, I have only covered a fraction of the affect theory and focused on the more current pattern of the use of affect. With the contributions of those many contemporary thinkers of affect theory, whom I have applied to while exploring what could affect as a transformative force reveal about *The Artist Is Present*, we have gained an exciting approach not just to the performance art but to art in general. Affective quality of an art event that is highlighted through the affect theory, assigns art a sacred position and claims that art is the only thing that is preserved and can preserve and what it preserves is “bloc of sensations, compound of percept and affects” (Deleuze and Guattari 1994: 64).

Art’s primary mission is not to convey meaning or provide knowledge and information. Art may well constitute meaning and create knowledge but what makes art, *art* is not its content but its affect, through which a corporeal and sensible knowledge are produced. Art is able to produce thought through integration of *sensations*, *affects* and *percepts* into an art event. The heterogeneity of the network that these elements create leads toward the construction of art monuments. None of these elements can be considered separate; they function as a web of thoughts and provide an irreplaceable place for art. Affect studies approaches art through the

perspective of transhuman aesthetics. Art is seen as a path to reconnect us with the world and also an access point to another world: the world of impermanence, interpenetration and molecular world of becoming. It activates our intensive register to the territory that we exist in and opens the non-human universe that we are part of. Through art we are introduced to novel ways of existence, different possibilities of being and becoming. Art is seen as an active, independent entity that invades us with its power to embrace *affects*, *percepts* and *blocs of sensations*.

I strongly believe that, in O'Sullivan's (2011: 125) terms, the art's *apartness*, its unique positioning in the world and moving capacity, is what makes art unique and important. Lyotard (1991: 93) articulated that: The work of art is not merely a cultural object, although it is that too. It harbours within it an excess, a rapture, a potential of associations that overflows all the determinations of its "reception" and "production". In this thesis, I tried to highlight this "excess" and "rapture" through which art's affective capacity arised and exceeded its value as a cultural object. Affect is the bodily sensation that is sustained and conveyed particularly by aesthetic experiences. It is the force that is emerged from an intuitive yet mindful attention to the joy, pleasure, pain, astonishment, shock or beauty (Thompson 2009: 135). As we have gone through the affective power of art, by focusing on Abramović's performance journey and ended up with *The Artist Is Present*, we could realize that aesthetic power of art in an inherited sense, in conjunction with the notion of affect. With focusing on *The Artist Is Present*, with its processual and experiential nature, I aimed to carve out a way of understanding a novel approach to the performance art. The idea of an art event as a language of sensation that can extract the new harmonies and rhythmic characters, which affect studies perspective provides, opens

an intriguing path to access art. Besides witnessing Abramović's provocative performance history with its paths of endurance, spirituality and violence, having an oral and visual archive of the dozens of crying people, encourages the examination of the way individual experience is constituted within the piece. Massumi (2002: 217) articulated that, "affect is the connecting thread of experience. It holds the world together. In event."

This tenacious bond between affect and experience reveals the affective power in seeing the tears of the artist and the spectators akin to the aesthetic experience. As we gained insight on the central role of spectator's experiences in shaping the art event, with the help of the idea that art as experience and of affect theory, adapting an affective judgment to unravel art's limitless possibilities to create blocs of sensations and affects, will rescue art from being trapped in the representational thought and provide a reviving perspective. Bennett (2005: 23) argued that affect produces real-time somatic experiences that we can no longer frame them as representations, and certain art projects can only properly understood in terms of the production of the experience outside of the representation frame. Thus, affect can only be understood, hoped for and considered in relation to aesthetic experience. Affects are sensations, emerged from the encounter between *the body* and *the event* without being depended on the realm of consciousness or cognition. In this respect, applying to affects in the art viewing processes heightens the sense of contemplation of art and freed this process from the registry of cognition (Thompson 2009: 120). As a consequence, affects highlight the affective sensations of an art event and encourage a shift in focus on cognitive and representational state of *seeing*, and thus, protect the vitality in the art viewing process. In Gumbrecht's explanation (2004:

77), instead of the *meaning culture*, the emphasis of *The Artist Is Present*, and in a wider scope the emphasis of performance art is on *presence culture*. This indicates the way affective encounter surpasses the meaning-based relationship with art and how it nourishes the appreciation of the unmediated physical *touch* of art objects comes into a question. This form of appreciation, which I have praised in this thesis, is not interested in what art is done for. Rather it focuses on the affective power of art and asks these two essential questions: what is art capable of and how does it move us?

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