

# Marina Abramović: A Monologue

Roland Barthes testified at the beginning of his autobiography, that this form of self-reflection ‘must be considered as if spoken by a character in a novel – or rather by several characters’<sup>1</sup>.

Inspired by this quotation, I present to you a monologue; a theatrical form of auto critique which voices the mediations and judgements of the artist Marina Abramović, art critics, theorists and myself through a fictitious creation of Abramović. Throughout the critique I aim to stay true to the notion of performative appraisal by generating a hybrid of performance and criticism on the topics of both *performance* and *criticism*. I aim to shadow Abramović’s performative strategy of identifying and defining limits in my writing technique, ensuring to stay faithful to the conception of a multiple personae of a singular self.

## Abramović:

To be able to recognise and separate from destructive voices, we must first recognise that many thoughts we regard as our own may not be representative of our true self. This solidification of self-critique is integral to my work in the field of performance art. I acknowledge my position of privilege and the authority I hold in deliberating our topic: myself. However, I contest it in equal proportions. I speak to you from a transcendental position, through a veil of mutual subjectivity and restriction. Ultimately, your systematic evaluations outweigh the conviction of my own: You can see me, as *I* perform, as *I* am, but *I* cannot see myself. The only access I have to my performance rests with a camera or a mirror, but as Susan Sontag attested, photography is a flawed representation

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1 Gane, Mike, and Nicholas Gane. "Chapter One." *Roland Barthes*. London: Sage, 2004. p.1.

of the truth<sup>2</sup>. The human eye claims the utmost power. Is my hand in the right position? Do my eyes pierce you with a look of contempt or adoration? Well they shouldn't, I was going for indifference. I cannot ensure that you fathom what I strive for in my artworks, and suddenly, the moment has vanished and you are left to deduce my performance for what it was, not necessarily what it was meant to be. Of course the volatility of what I do is fundamental; I am not always faithful to performance and cannot expect the same in return therefore, I conclude that when I am performing anything that happens in those moments becomes part of it. I profess myself the grandmother of performance art<sup>3</sup>. This is no self-glorifying declaration - to be old and sagacious is to acknowledge fault. My wisdom can only be acquired through experiences of both failure and triumph. Interpretation is the revenge of the intellectual upon art<sup>4</sup>, and I have long considered the interpretations and sentiments my art induces. The eyes that survey me, the pens and keyboards that scream, shout and whisper my name. To praise me, to deconstruct me, to construct and reconstruct me.

I am a nomadic artist<sup>5</sup>; performance affords me with the opportunity for transcendence into new dimensions and realms. The need to define myself and the spaces I inhabit has always been paramount to me, as I teenager I collected dozens of tins of brown shoe polish to transform my bedroom<sup>6</sup>, and I still recall the potent smell as I smeared the walls, wanting my mother to leave me alone to soak in the solitary I'd envisioned. In many senses, this idea of a forced separation remains imperative to my performative work, there is always a divide between the audience and I and it is only through acknowledging this dissent that I can invoke the response of the audience and enact what I preach. My childhood was spent in the Socialist Republic of Yugoslavia under the leadership

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2 Sontag, Susan. *On photography*. New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1977. p.15.

3 Abramović, Marina. *Marina Cleaning the House*. London: Academy Eds, 1995. p.43.

4 Sontag, Susan. *Against Interpretation, and Other Essays*. New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1966. p.13.

5 Abramović, p. 24.

6 Richards, Mary. *Marina Abramović*. London: Routledge, 2010. p.10.

of the paternalistic dictator Josip Broz Tito. My parents were communist partisans and, as such, took part in the National Liberation War supporting an army headed by Tito<sup>7</sup>. My father left in 1964, and despite being an adult my mother took completely control of my brother and I - forbidden from leaving the house after 10 O'Clock at night until the age of 29<sup>8</sup>. The militancy of my mother and the repressive culture of Tito's post-war Yugoslavia had a great hold on me. My art stems from a thirst for autonomy, from restriction, from the constraints of my own family and nation, it is emotional and personal – it is subjective and self-intrusive. As ritualistic purifications, my art allows me to self- sanitise, emancipating and cleansing me from my past.

In 1975 I met Ulay, he shared not only my date of birth but my artistic values and beliefs. Over the next two decades we were lovers and collaborative partners. Ulay was also interested in cultural heritage and the individual's desire for ritual and we decided to form a collective being called *The Other* or the *Two-Headed Body*. This projection of a duel, phantom identity was an apparition of kinship and commitment, and consequently diluted our individual identities. Charles Green declared that this authorised a dexterous understanding of us as performers as the work exposed us permitting ourselves to self-scrutinise<sup>9</sup>. This was true: how can you *not* estimate your own worth when you have put yourself in a position of having less worth, or rather - being less whole, less human? Our performances explored the parameters of power and dependency within the triangular relationship between each other and our audiences. This proved problematic: a battle of egos. I had to find out how to put my own ego down, as did he, to create something like a hermaphroditic state of being that we called *The Death of Self*<sup>10</sup>. This submission of my ego forced me to question my own authority – over both my art practice and self. Ulay and I created another piece in order to

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7 Ibid, p.1.

8 McEvilly, Thomas. "Stages of Energy: Performance Art Ground Zero?". *Abramović, Artist Body*. Milan: Charta, 1998. p.54.

9 Green, Charles. "Doppelgängers and the Third Force: The Artistic Collaborations of Gilbert & George and Marina Abramović/Ulay". *Art Journal* 59.2. p.36.

10 Daneri, Anna. *Marina Abramović*. Milan: Charta, 2002. p.35.

explore the physical power we held over each other. *Breathing In/Breathing Out* saw us connecting our mouths and taking in one another's exhaled breaths until the oxygen ran out, which it did, seventeen minutes later and we both fell unconscious having filled our lungs with carbon dioxide. To some this may seem reckless, to us it was a flawless illustration of the individual's ability to absorb the life of another person, exchanging it and obliterating it. In 1988 our romantic bond and professional enterprise ceased after a co-ordinated sacred journey of the Great Wall of China, starting at opposite ends to meet in the middle. I felt human. I felt alone. This was absolute because in the end you are really alone, whatever you do<sup>11</sup>, and this is a philosophy which endures in my contemporary pieces.

In 2013, I participated in an online chatroom which offered me the chance for explanation and self-evaluation. I was probed on my views on feminism<sup>12</sup>, something I am asked frequently, to which I responded that my views had changed. I think that feminism itself has changed and I have a different understanding of the complexities and dynamism of feminine energy. Although my work engages with the female body I have always been concerned with the body as a unit of an individual without concern for gender ideologies. I do not publicly affirm myself a feminist as I do not actively reference nor fight for gender equality; to me it is something that is assumed. In some respects I am an antithesis of what a archetypical feminist should be: I use my body to earn money. I am sure this declaration immediately conjures the most notorious of positions – prostitute, pornstar. Can I be compared equal? Yes, I have been naked; yes I have been in compromising positions. Do you remember my re-enactment of Vito Acconci's *Seedbed*, in which I masturbated under the floorboards of the gallery and spoke into a microphone as visitors walked ahead? I read an online review which identified that my recreation appeared to mean something different because I was a woman. This confounded me, I did not and I do not aim to instigate gender debates, nor do I view

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11 Ibid, p.35.

12 "I Am Performance Artist Marina Abramovic. Ask Me Anything. • /r/IAMA." Reddit. Web. 22 April. 2014.

my art as a contemporary feminist statement. Note my nonchalance: A feminist would have proclaimed offence, not confusion. *Biography*, a ninety minute solo piece was a living *Catalogue Raisonné* of all my performances – re-performances of earlier material. I sought to dramatically reinstate myself as a solo artist after my departure from Ulay; the performances at theatres across Europe provided me with that very opportunity. I recall an interview with Ilse Kuijken in 1992, I told her that performance artists typically detest the structure of theatre and that *Biography* only worked in the theatre set-up as you're playing a character, a character of your past<sup>13</sup>. The piece functioned as guise of self-pacification, allowing me to explore and manifest my life's work, I felt soothed, hovering somewhere between absorption and extraction. One could say that this very sermon is doing the same thing. Is it *Catalogue Raisonné*, or is it existing as its own entity?

The medium of performance art is ephemeral, my position as a performance artist can be both permanent and temporal, and this is paradoxical; a moment of tangible existence leaving behind the residue of my soul. As I stated in *Cleaning the House* - only when one is aware of temporality can one take full responsibility<sup>14</sup>. My primary method for this is through the exploration of the relationship between my body and my mind, its limits and potentials - the material and immaterial. I have established that the politics of the body can be regulated, but the possibilities of the mind are boundless and despite their internal cementation they are all that more unbound. Although my work is physical, I want you to visit the conceptual through my movement; my art is not what occurs: it is what you perceive, what I want you to assess. I am actively separate from you, the audience, but, through my status of subject and yours of spectator we meet in another realm: to address my performance together.

In a conversation with Hans Ulrich Obrist I address the aspect of the intangible through a work by German artist Tino Sehgal. Tino sold an artwork to the Tate, that artwork was the single whisper in

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13 Iles, Chrissie. "An Interview with Marina Abramović in Theaterschrift, Brussels". *Marina Abramović: Objects Performance Video Sound*. Oxford: Museum of Modern Art: 1992. p.17.

14 Abramović, p.13.

the ear of the curator<sup>15</sup>. I feel this is a clear portrayal of the most supernatural of all performance art and really forces any spectator (or rather someone who is *aware* this artwork exists) to question the eternally provocative notion of abstraction. This debate is what I want to evoke from my art – although one can possess video documentation, installation or photographic representation, it is the perpetual flavour of unfeasibility which is crucial. In 1973 I explored the elements of ritual and gesture through the Russian game entitled *Rhythm 10*. I aimed the knife between the splayed fingers of my hand and proceeded to jab in rhythmic motion, each time I cut myself I picked up a new knife from a row of twenty and repeated the process. Once I had cut myself twenty times, I replayed the tape and listened to the sounds - then tried to duplicate the movements, attempting to reproduce the same mistakes. This was a conclusive examination of my own boundaries - both the figurative and theoretic - in order to merge past and present. I mediated my state of consciousness - once you enter into this state you can push your body to do things you absolutely could never normally do<sup>16</sup>, thus entering a liminal zone. Endurance and persistence impregnate me and my performances are the children of our collaboration. They allow me to work as I do. They are my motivations, the reasons I continue to practice my art in spite of the odd failures, and I use this term loosely, which occur. In *Rhythm 5* my work had never been more sacrificial. Allow me to first explain to you my intentions. I lit a large petroleum-drenched five-point star on fire and stood outside it, cutting my hair and nails. I then proceeded to throw the clippings onto the flame to generate ruptures of light. As I burnt the star I practised purification: salvation from the political custody of my past. In a final act of refinement I impelled myself into the centre of the star and fell unconscious, only through audience intervention was my performance and life saved. From this I ascertained and accepted there is a physical limit, when you lose consciousness you can't be present: you can't perform<sup>17</sup>. This is how

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15 Obrist, Hans. *Hans Ulrich Obrist: interviews*. Florence: Fondazione Pitti Immagine Discovery: 2003. p.1.

16 Kaplan, Janet. "Deeper and Deeper: Interview with Marina Abramović". *Art Journal* 58:2 (1999). p.19.

17 Abramović, Marina. *Fifteen Artists*. Milan: Charta, 2002. P.29.

I test my limits, I do acknowledge this may seem senseless, brutal and unnerving but for me, the challenge is pivotal. I must submit myself to the act, irrespective of the aftermath – my dedication to the present and you, my congregation, is crucial.

It is through performance I discovered the possibility of establishing a dialogue with the audience through an exchange of energy, which tended to transform the energy itself. I could not produce a single work without the presence of the audience, because the audience gives me the energy to be able to assimilate it and return it and to create a genuine field of momentum. Yes, the hierarchies of power between us must be acknowledged. I perform; I have the power of influence, but when you observe and judge me, I renounce it. Driven by the self-ignited command of my own endurance I test yours: your ability to witness the danger, to witness my pain. I conceive a point of rupture – a fanatic culmination of the performance which highlights the spectators own sense of that moment. There is a high degree of trust when testing the limits of the relationship between performer and audience, in *Rhythm: 0* I tested these parameters of faith to the maximum. I presented the audience with 72 objects, including a rose, a feather, olive oil, a scalpel, honey, scissors, a whip and a gun with a single bullet, and I told them they could use them in anyway they desired. The participants proceeded to manipulate my body and actions for six hours. At first, they were hesitant, using caution and prudence - that rapidly changed and an antagonistic and destructive performance came into being. They stuck rose thorns in my stomach, they cut up my clothes and one person aimed the gun at my head, then another took it away. I did not break from my passive role: I had relinquished my rights to perform, subsequently gifting it to my audience. After six hours I eventually stood up and started walking towards the audience, to which they immediately ran away<sup>18</sup> – this instated the re-reversal of positions of authority. Did I now hold the authority to critique them? Could I truly deliberate their performances?

I surrender myself to criticism from the art world too. Many artists obtain status from a public

construction of their intellect, which is so often illusive and aligned with detachment. And by this I refer to the painters, the sculptors and the architects - to those who spread their seed to grow a tree which exists in the material world. However, I must state – that although their work is visible, permanently contained in the world’s finest art institutions, they are not. In society, artists are not celebrities; they distance themselves from the public – perhaps to avoid scrutiny? However, I am present, through the participatory and performative nature of my work and ethos I am available.

### Self Critique: re-enacted

Brimming with ambiguity, the piece presents the reader with myriad complexities on how to disentangle and negotiate Abramović; both the bona fide figure and literary composition of her. We can approach this deliberation through the figurative parallels of monologue and soliloquy. If we evaluate these performative strategies as delineating active liberation through recognition of audience (monologue) and internal preservation of thought and idea (soliloquy) the writing can be considered a self-conscious fusion of both. Although Abramović speaks of self- restriction and the limitations that exist within her practice there is a near-violent tonality of definitive emancipation that dominates both subject matter and execution. *Marina Abramović: A Monologue* enacts as a compact *catalogue raisonné*, a style close to Abramović’s heart – as each voice channelled through ‘Marina’, including her very own, re-performs performance and theatrically surrenders to her art.

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