

Towards an Open Work: Marina Abramović and Public Participation

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Marina Abramović's reputation as one of the world's leading performance artists rests on more than four decades of work. In 2014, multiple publications named her the most influential or powerful woman or artist in Contemporary Art.¹ After gaining visibility in Europe and her native Yugoslavia with her provocative and dangerous solo works, her intimate collaboration with the German artist Ulay insured her inclusion in the canon of performance art. Her late works of the 21st century reflect her development of a meditative approach to performance and her interest in transmitting the embodied experience of mindful meditation to her audience.

This paper follows the emergence of Abramović's transcultural aesthetic of the open work, a mode of public participation. The aesthetic theory of the open work derives from the research of semiotician and literary theorist Umberto Eco and his reading of composer Henri Pousseur. Eco develops and applies this theory in his 1962 essay, "The Poetics of the Open Work." To summarize, the open work allows public participation in the work of art, be it literature, music, or contemporary arts. It accommodates conscious acts of freedom by participants within the confines of the artist's formal strictures.² Abramović's strictures emphasize time and attention, cultivating mindfulness through meditation.

Before the 21st century, Abramović had included public participation in a single, prior performance, *Rhythm Zero* of 1975, when she offered 72 objects of pleasure and pain for the audience to use on her while she presented herself as an object and was completely passive. The six-hour performance included knives, a loaded gun and other less threatening objects that resulted in danger and fear so

intense the artist avoided participatory work for nearly 27 years. In November 2002, Abramović returned to the open work and performed *The House with the Ocean View* at Sean Kelly Gallery for 12 days (Figure 1). During the performance, Abramović lived in the gallery 24 hours a day in an architectural installation of minimal, modern design where all her activities were visible to the public. The duration of the performance and austerities she performed drew on Buddhist meditation retreats in the technique of Vipassana, or insight.³ During a Vipassana retreat, meditators refrain from speaking to maintain strict observation of their mind and body. The concentration, increased awareness, and purification of the mind result in deeper senses of tranquility and depth of insight. To this meditation practice, Abramović added fasting, specialized clothing, and the participation of the public. Each person who entered the gallery agreed to keep silent, use a telescope to observe the artist, and engage in an "energy dialogue." The formal strictures the work placed on the public created the necessary conditions of religious ritual. All of Abramović's participatory performances of the last twelve years fit within the category of religious ritual by applying an anthropological definition derived by anthropologist Marcel Hénaff.⁴

In addition to the non-western element of Buddhist retreat, the installation included ladders with knives, a gesture towards the shamans of the Brazilian Amazon. The presence of knives alludes to the qualities of mind that a shaman can develop to overcome conventional mental and physical limits, developing the ability to descend or ascend a ladder of knives without injury.⁵ During the performance, Abramović

This study draws on my dissertation, a career-long survey of Marina Abramović's performance oeuvre that traces her travels around the world, and how she has developed her performance aesthetic through the experience of other cultures. This work is especially indebted to Marina Abramović, the support of my dissertation advisor, Norman Bryson, as well as the Department of Visual Arts, which generously funded my research. I would also like to thank the Center for the Humanities and the Arthur C. Clarke Center for Human Imagination at the University of California, San Diego, for enriching this project with opportunities to attend the *Generator* exhibition and participate in the Abramović Method Workshop.

¹ "Marina Abramović / Power 100 / Art Review," accessed 18 August, 2015, http://artreview.com/power_100/marina_abramovic/; "Marina Abramović," *Time*, April 23, 2014, <http://time.com/collection/2014-time-100/>; "The 100 Most Powerful Women in Art: Part One," *Artnet News*, October 15, 2014, <https://news.artnet.com/people/the-100-most-powerful-women-in-art-part-one-124409>.

² Umberto Eco, "The Poetics of the Open Work," in *Participation*, ed. Claire Bishop, Documents of Contemporary Art (London; Cambridge, Mass; Whitechapel: MIT Press, 2006), 20-40.

³ Thomas McEvilly, "Performing the Present Tense," in *Marina Abramović: The House with the Ocean View* (Milano: Charta, 2003), 168.

⁴ Hénaff's necessary conditions for religious ritual include strictures of space, time, body, conduct, equality between participants, publicity, and procedural actions. His strictures depend on the work of other anthropologists including Levi-Strauss, Mauss, Malinowski and Turner. Marcel Hénaff, "Sufficient Conditions of Religious Ritual," in *Secularization: Beyond Political Theology and the Disenchantment of the World* (Graduate Seminar in Political Theory and Literature) (University of California, San Diego, 2009).

⁵ Janet A. Kaplan, "Deeper and Deeper: Interview with Marina Abramović," *Art Journal* 58, no. 2 (Summer 1999): 9.

did not attempt to use the ladders, but communed in energy dialogue with some participants with her bare feet poised on the highest rung.

As a ritual intended to observe, purify, and heal the emotional wounds of the city of New York after the events of September 11, 2001, *The House with the Ocean View* attracted significant attention, not only for Abramović's austerities but also for the intimate experience of eye contact that encompassed the shared experience of energy dialogue. Abramović developed its aesthetic by performing a cultivated state of mind and her intention to share that loving and peaceful state of mind with others. In this way, Abramović's focus on embodied experience reflects an important example of rasaesthetics, a theory of dance aesthetics adapted from second century India by performance scholar Richard Schechner. Rasaesthetics emphasize the audience's shared experience of bliss through the perception of the body, rather than an emphasis on visual pleasure as in western aesthetics. Central to the application of rasaesthetics to the work of Abramović is the concept of *abhinaya*, which functions as a transcultural and transhistorical reception theory. In the experience of *abhinaya*, the performer "leads the performance to the spectators."⁶ When *abhinaya* occurs, the performer cultivates a state of consciousness or emotion that the audience can perceive, and following her lead, share. In *The House with the Ocean View*, through her open aesthetic Abramović participated in a reflexive form of *abhinaya* where she was receptive to the emotions of the audience, as well as sharing her meditative state of mind with them. Multiple observers noted the transcendent states the artist and some members of the public experienced, resulting in collective states of meditative consciousness the critic Roberta Smith described as "reverential."⁷

In the years following *The House with the Ocean View*, Abramović's ability to stimulate vigorous discourse around the institutionalization of performance art solidified her position as one of the leading exponents of the medium. In 2010, Abramović was the subject of the first retrospective of performance art at the Museum of Modern Art in New York. Simultaneous with that exhibition, Abramović performed a new work in the Marron Atrium titled *The Artist Is Present*. Formally, *The Artist Is Present* is an extremely simple work yet of monumental and spectacular proportions. In the atrium, Abramović sat for 75 days making silent eye contact with the public. More than 1500 people chose to participate in the work and its context of cinematic lights, documentary film crew, streaming video, and portrait photography (Figure 2).

⁶ Richard Schechner, "Rasaesthetics," *TDR (1988-)* 45, no. 3 (October 1, 2001): 31.

⁷ Roberta Smith, "ART REVIEW; Where Seeing Is Not Only Believing, but Also Creating," *The New York Times*, November 22, 2002, sec. Arts, <http://www.nytimes.com/2002/11/22/arts/art-review-where-seeing-is-not-only-believing-but-also-creating.html>.

⁸ My own six sittings in the interest of art historical research attracted

In the simple act of meditative presence and eye contact, Abramović opened her work to the possibility of public participation as her equal. As an open work, the formal limitations of *The Artist Is Present* required participants to be present, silent, and maintain eye contact with Abramović for as long as they wished. Within these limits, participants engaged in a multitude of different approaches to the work, with great emphasis on the variable of time. As the most flexible of the formal elements of the work, how long participants sat became a topic of discussion among spectators and, more importantly, those waiting in line. While most sitters sat between five and twenty minutes, the open aesthetic of the performance resulted in a small number of performances of three to seven hours. In addition to these distinctive performances of great length, several participants became highly recognizable in the MoMA photostream of portraits by sitting repeatedly, some as many as ten to thirty times (Figure 3).⁸ Sitter Paco Blancas attained a sort of micro celebrity during the event for his ubiquity and being the only person to sit from the beginning to the end of the day with Abramović. In all, he participated 21 times and was so affected by the experience he had the number 21 tattooed on his forearm. Marco Anelli's portraits included every person who participated in his photographs that document the performance. In a set of portraits from *The Artist Is Present*, originally hosted on Anelli's website, one could identify actor Alan Rickman, photographer Andres Serrano, musician Bjork, artist Matthew Barney, actress Marisa Tomei, poet and musician Patti Smith, musician Michael Stipe, and artists Tehching Hsieh, Ulay, and Joan Jonas (Figure 4).

The focus of this essay on Vipassana meditation brings the underpinnings of Abramović's performance method to the forefront, something the artist does not discuss in detail, but her former collaborator Ulay has clarified in recent interviews.⁹ Like *The House with the Ocean View*, *The Artist Is Present* relied on a mutual exchange of gazes to connect the presence of the artist with the public. The formal strictures of the work recall Abramović's performance with Ulay, *Nightsea Crossing*, which the artists also based on the practice of Vipassana meditation. In *Nightsea Crossing*, an important series of performances that eventually included cross-cultural participation, the artists practiced meditation to maintain complete stillness and presence of mind as the pair sat across from each other at a table for the length of a museum day (Figure 5). The title *Nightsea Crossing* refers to a journey into the unconscious, an experience Abramović and Ulay observed at length while living for months in Aus-

the attention of Flickr users "fearless day" and "plastic tourist" who created galleries of my portraits and others who participated repeatedly.

⁹ Maria Rus Bojan et al., *Whispers: Ulay on Ulay*, 2014, 234. This is an important interview-focused text by Maria Rus Bojan and Alessandro Cassin that has provided essential insight into the development of some of Abramović's performance techniques.

tralia's Central Desert. The searing heat of the desert climate reduced their movement to nothing, and expanded their mental awareness. Similar to abhinaya, they intended to transmit this experience of expanded consciousness through stillness to art audiences with their meditative presence. To accomplish a posture of complete stillness, the couple practiced the mental and physical discipline of Vipassana meditation. Abramović adapted this performance for *The Artist Is Present* without requiring that participants match her meditative endurance.

As Eco writes of the open work, "The work in movement is not an amorphous invitation to indiscriminate participation. The invitation offers the performer the opportunity for an oriented insertion into something which always remains the world intended by the author."¹⁰

Of the many recognizable celebrities and artists who participated, a handful of artists used the open quality of Abramović's aesthetic to stage their own distinctive performances within the rarefied venue of the Museum of Modern Art. One of the most discussed performances adapted to the aesthetic of the open work through demonstration of similar endurance. Performance artist Anya Lifting arrived in a black wig and blue gown, emulating Abramović's appearance. The artists appeared in profile on MOMA's online streaming video of the work. In the performance within a performance titled, *The Anxiety of Influence*, a reference to the work of literary criticism by Harold Bloom, Lifting sat for more than six hours (Figure 6). The marathon sitting was a challenge to Lifting who often felt the desire to leave, but managed to achieve her goal and finish sitting the museum day.¹¹ Her willingness to conform to the limits set by Abramović resulted in a successful work that significantly increased her public profile as an artist.

In his performance *The Other Artist Is Present*, artist Amir Baradaran attempted to sit three times and stage interventions during which he spoke, violating the limits of Abramović's open aesthetic (Figure 7). In the first part of his three-part performance, he approached Abramović in a red gown mimicking her own. He made a statement honoring her and her body of work before asking her to marry him in a temporary marriage in the manner of his Shiite Muslim heritage.¹² Baradaran's second performance in masculine clothing involved props and chanting of a Sufi mantra that referred to Abramović's well known performance *Art is Beau-*

tiful, Artist Must Be Beautiful. He was ejected and banned from the museum for not conforming to the strictures of the performance and was unable to return to complete his third intervention.

As the days and weeks passed, the limits enforced by MoMA security protected the integrity of Abramović's authorship and the boundaries of her aesthetic from numerous interventions by other artists. Like Baradaran's intervention, not only were religious themes intended by artist participants, but also experienced in the process of participation. A wide range of comparisons to religious experience have been documented by participants and observers, as well as other altered states of consciousness, including feelings of love, profound emotional intimacy, non-verbal communication, and lost sense of time. Several participants and observers, including art historians and critics reported experiences of spontaneous meditation and feelings of a related collective presence among those who spent long periods of time viewing the work. These outcomes point to the relevance of abhinaya and rasaesthetics in Abramović's increasingly social practice.

Scholars have documented the spiritual and religious dimensions of Abramović's inspirations, but her explicit meditative intentions have only recently become a central part of her work as public participation has come to its center, moving participatory aesthetics beyond Bourriaud's formulation of relational aesthetics. In 2014, she presented the work *Generator* at Sean Kelly Gallery in New York (Figure 8). Abramović or her assistants blindfolded and outfitted participants with noise cancelling headphones, then led them into the gallery space where they moved slowly and freely about the space for as long as they liked. Abramović's intent was to open participants to the introspective experience of the inner world and emptiness, or *sunyata*, a Buddhist concept of non-attachment that results in elimination of mental impurities that cause feelings of dissatisfaction common to the human condition.

The open aesthetic allowed participants to direct their own experience, moving through the space, sitting in meditation, feeling their way around the walls and discovering how they adapted to their own altered subjectivity.¹³ Abramović uses the same methods to train performers in her workshops and academic teaching. She now describes her role as a "conductor" rather than a performer, transforming

¹⁰ Eco, "The Poetics of the Open Work," 23.

¹¹ Anna Lifting, "The Anxiety of Influence: Anya Lifting," accessed 31 March, 2011, <http://www.anyalifting.com/index.php?/performance/the-anxiety-of-influence/> See also, additional accounts of the performance in the art press and online in: Tatiana Berg, "The Anxiety of Influence," *BOMB Magazine*, March 29, 2010, <http://bombmagazine.org/article/4326/>; Anna Lifting, "No Smarties » Seein' Dis: The Anxiety of Influence," accessed 30 March, 2010, <http://nosmarties.com/2010/seein-dis-the-anxiety-of-influence/>.

¹² Abramović mentioned this work to me with fond remembrance during her workshop in 2015. Baradaran's work has repeatedly focused on rituals of marriage and partnerships accentuating art queer and ethnic identity. "Amir Baradaran—The Other Artist Is Present," accessed 30 March, 2010, <http://www.amirbaradaran.com/>.

¹³ My experience of this work was remarkable, my sense of smell was heightened, and I became very aware of subtle senses in the body, which were more intense after being in the space for a while. I also encountered other participants who engaged me with greater intimacy than is common or comfortable between strangers.

the artist's role into one of guidance using the vocabulary of musical performance.¹⁴

As Abramović has shifted her performing presence into a teaching or conducting role, she is developing a collection of practices known as the Abramović Method to continue the legacy of her art after her death at her Marina Abramović Institute and art institutions worldwide. She has already presented this turn towards public practice in events on four continents in 2014-15. Her threads stories about her experience of other cultures' spiritual practices and wisdom throughout her teaching and artist's talks with strong emphases on the traditions of the Indian subcontinent and Tibetan plateau. In her workshops, Abramović has developed significant emphasis on movement and sound, as well as adapting her past performances as disciplinary exercises to train artists for long duration performance. Abramović pairs her emphasis on time with a distinct and pervasive emphasis on slowness, decelerating movement to draw mental and physical attention to embodied experience.

During the Abramović Method Workshop of 2015 at the University of California, San Diego, a sensory deprivation exercise similar to *Generator* resulted in the development of intimacy, where handholding and hugs were frequent in the context of known participants. This was one of the most popular of Abramović's exercises allowing participants to explore their subjectivity and human contact in unfamiliar ways that participants compared to processes of spiritual, intimate, and erotic discovery. The intimacy and community that arose during the sensory deprivation exercise, *Generator*, and around *The Artist Is Present* surprised Abramović, who has developed her Method to increase mindfulness and introspection.

In the 45-minute "Looking At Each Other Exercise," Abramović opens the aesthetic dimensions of *Nightsea Crossing* and *The Artist Is Present* into an encounter between individuals without emphasizing the centrality of the Abramović or her famously charismatic presence (Figure 9). This exercise has long been a part of her art school pedagogy for more than 15 years and has been included in recent exhibitions in London England, Sao Paulo, Brazil, and Sydney, Australia. It results in greater concentration as well as altered states of consciousness for participants. Like the "Sensory Deprivation Exercise," "Looking at Each Other" had significant impact

on participants, who described their array of experiences as powerfully transformative, hallucinatory, and filled with non-verbal communication. Award winning science fiction author Kim Stanley Robinson selected this exercise as his favorite, finding it fascinating.¹⁵

Buddhist meditation appears again among her exercises as "Vipassana Walking" exercise, where Abramović instructs participants to observe and label each element of the act of walking, while doing so as slowly as possible. The "Vipassana Walking" exercise is 60 minutes long in workshop and exhibition spaces, where the open aesthetic manifests as complete subjective control of one's participation (Figure 10). In "Vipassana Walking," complete focus on decelerated subjective experience results in a form of intense, meditative self-observation. Participants may also experience *abhinaya* as they attend to others in the environment, resulting in a magnification of participants' freedom of choice in the cultivation of concentration and attention. This aesthetic of mindfulness, decelerated action, and freedom of choice are preparation for artmaking in workshop environments as seen here in rehearsals for the sound work *3015*, which the performance recorded during the workshop and debuted at Museo Fortuny during the Venice Biennale of 2015. In this performance open aesthetics also prevailed. Workshop participants selected their performative contribution by reading from a long list of galaxy, constellation, and star names related to a text by Kim Stanley Robinson.

Marina Abramović's performance techniques and aesthetics rely on non-Western techniques of meditation that emphasize the cultivation of peaceful concentration. In an environment of increased focus and decelerated action, unexpected experiences of interpersonal intimacy have arisen. Since adapting her performances of the 1980s that presented meditative focus as an outcome of the artist's object-like stillness, her work of the 21st century has consistently presented an open aesthetic of public participation. This aesthetic not only secularizes non-Western meditation practice, but introduces *rasa*aesthetics and the shared performative experience of *abhinaya* into Contemporary performance, an important concept for understanding the transcultural aesthetics of performance and participation in global contemporary art.

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¹⁴ Michael Young, "Marina Abramović At Sydney Kaldor Public Art Projects And Hobart Museum Of Old And New Art," *ArtAsiaPacific*, February 15, 2015, <http://artasiapacific.com/News/MarinaAbramovicAtSydneyKaldorPublicArtProjectsAndHobartMuseumOfOldAndNew-Art>.

¹⁵ My own well-established meditation practice has been important to participating as an informed observer, while applying ethnographic research methods and participating with meditative attention.



▲ Figure 1. [above] Marina Abramović, *House with Ocean View*, 2002, Performance, 12 days, Sean Kelly Gallery, New York. © Marina Abramović, Courtesy of the Marina Abramović Archives. Photo credit: Steven P. Harris.



Figure 2. Marina Abramović, *The Artist Is Present*, April 19, 2010. Photo credit: Chanda Laine Carey.

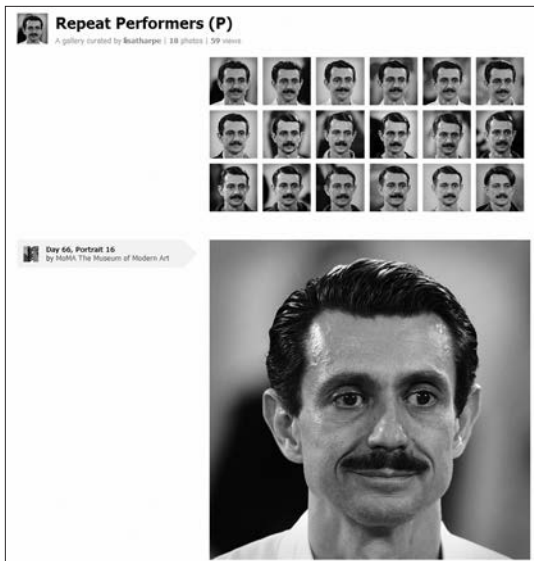


Figure 3. Marco Anelli, portraits of Paco Blancas, Flickr gallery screenshot, September 22, 2010. Photo credit: Portraits in the Presence of Marina Abramović. Photographs by Marco Anelli © 2010.



Figure 4. Marco Anelli, website screen shot, September 22, 2010. Photographs by Marco Anelli © 2010.



Figure 5. Marina Abramović / Ulay, *Nightsea Crossing*, 1986, Performance, The New Museum, New York, © Marina Abramović and Ulay. Courtesy of the Marina Abramović Archives



Figure 6. Anya Liftig, *The Anxiety of Influence*, streaming video screenshot, March 27, 2010. Courtesy Anya Liftig.



Figure 7. Amir Baradaran, *The Other Artist Is Present*, 2010. Courtesy Amir Baradaran.

Figure 8. Abramović Method Workshop, “Vipassana Walking Exercise,” University of California at San Diego, January 12-14, 2015. Arthur C. Clarke Center for Human Imagination. Photo credit: Kim Stanley Robinson, Marina Abramović and the Arthur C. Clarke Center for Human Imagination, Director Sheldon Brown, Assoc. Director David Kirsh.



Figure 9. Marina Abramović, *Generator*, 2014, Performance, Sean Kelly Gallery, New York, © Marina Abramović. Courtesy of the Marina Abramović Archives.



Figure 10. Abramović Method Workshop, “Looking At Each Other Exercise,” University of California at San Diego, January 12-14, 2015. Arthur C. Clarke Center for Human Imagination. Photo credit: Kim Stanley Robinson, Marina Abramović and the Arthur C. Clarke Center for Human Imagination, Director Sheldon Brown, Assoc. Director David Kirsh.



