

Peggy Phelan

On Seeing the Invisible: Marina Abramović's *The House with the Ocean View*

QUESTIONS TO PONDER WHILE READING THIS ARTICLE:

- 1) What does Phelan mean when she entertains the possibility that “life was ‘invented’ in order to respond to art, theatre, ritual and performance” ?
- 2) Describe the divide and the reason for the (very contentious) divide in the audience for Amramovic’s piece *Rhythm O*. How does *Rhythm O* illustrate the idea of a transformative experience for performer and audience?
- 3) Discuss Amramovic’s performances responding to war.
- 4) How does Amramovic simplify and elevate ritual and daily rhythms in *The House with the Ocean View*?

Marina Abramović came of age as a performance artist in the 1970s. During this decade, performance art undertook a radical examination of the mind/body problem, attempting to link ancient, inherited knowledge of the body with a newly expanded interest in alternative modes of consciousness as a medium for art.¹ The exploration of alternative modes of consciousness was reflected in drug culture and in the establishment of what has come to be called 'New Age philosophy'. Performance art, drug culture, and New Age investigations were motivated to explore alternative modes of consciousness by a recognition that much of Western thought and culture was insufficiently sensitive to the psychic and political force of embodiment. Descartes's famous proclamation, 'I think therefore I am', central to post-Enlightenment thought, ignored modes of being not related to rationality. Body artists of the 1970s, especially feminists, saw in performance an opportunity to explore questions that had been systematically repressed and ignored in Western thought. With a combination of courage and recklessness, performance artists of the 1970s focused particularly on what happens to the body and mind when thinking is a secondary, if not an impossible, response to the enacted event. Much of this work explored acute physical pain, and some touched on the elusive horizon separating life from death.

The Australian artist Stelarc pursued a series of spectacular suspension pieces throughout the decade. He inserted large fishhooks into his skin, hanging from walls and ceilings to demonstrate the porous nature of the body, open to the world, and the controlling energy of consciousness, mediating the pain of the penetrating hooks. Suspending his body in the centre of a gallery, Stelarc vividly exposed the surface of the body as a horizon for drama and for artistic and philosophical meditation and change. Vibrating with the sense of a future anatomy infused with the mechanical, the electronic, and the prosthetic, Stelarc's work in the 1970s pointed to a new conception of the body. By the late 1980s and early 1990s, he was imagining a conceptual and material transformation from the philosophical category of existence to the pragmatic category of the operational. This transformation would necessitate a revision of the place of human death in Western thought, for if the human body were to be defined as that which operates, then fixing parts and repairing mechanical failures would do away with the inevitability of permanent death.

Chris Burden, working in southern California, made a provocative piece entitled *Shoot* in 1971. Positioning himself against the white wall of a Santa Monica art gallery, Burden stood about 20 feet in front of a marksman, who raised his rifle and shot the artist in the upper arm. Burden had invited a small group of friends to watch the performance and he also had it filmed. The footage shows him calmly waiting for the shot, and then, stunned by the force of the bullet, springing off the wall. The speed of Burden's transformation from calm and relaxed young man to frantic, hopping body remains haunting today, thirty years on. While

Stelarc's 1970s work took him on a path that led to the dream of a cyborgic body capable of outlasting death, Burden's performance work gained its deepest force from his physical and mental encounters with death.

At issue for body artists of the 1970s was an investigation of the body as a medium for art and for life: what are its political possibilities and limits? How does the certainty of death challenge and/or sustain the all-too-fragile purposes of life? How can the relationship between the artist and her own body serve as a mirror for the broader drama of the relationship between the individual and the social body? The best body art of the 1970s employed endurance and physical pain as primary tools for the exploration of a new practice predicated on exploring bodily limits. Body artists claimed their own bodies as a medium and a metaphor for the relationship between self and other, performer and spectator, art and life, and life and death.

Also fuelling this work was a persistent question about what kind of art performance actually was. Working in the United States, artists such as Linda Montano, Allan Kaprow and Tehching Hsieh, explored the structure, and sometimes the content, of ritual as a way to create their work. Often summarised as work about 'art in everyday life', sometimes shortened to 'art/life performances', this work also represents a systematic investigation of ritual practice.²

The traditional understanding of the origin of theatre is that it emerged from ritual practices, understood to be performances designed to respond, indeed to manage, transformations in the life cycle. Thus, anthropologists have catalogued the ways in which various societies created ritual processes – often walkabouts or other kinds of acts that require physical endurance – to frame the rite of passage that transforms, for example, a boy into a man. This transformation in social and biological identity requires that the initiate be suspended in an in-between or liminal state during the ritual practice itself. That is, for the period of time in which the rite of passage is being performed, the initiate is neither fully a boy nor fully a man; rather, he is in the liminal stage between these two modes of being.³ Anthropologists speculate that most ritual practice was prompted by life transformations, and more particularly, by life's encounter with death. But I have sometimes wondered if perhaps the anthropologists have got it the wrong way around. While it is perfectly logical to assume that life began before ritual, theatre and performance – and therefore that these practices respond to life – perhaps it is useful to entertain the possibility that life was 'invented' in order to respond to art, theatre, ritual and performance. I mean this in the spirit of Michel Foucault's contention that sexuality was invented in the nineteenth century.⁴ Within this understanding of 'invention', while sexual activity occurred prior to the nineteenth century, consciousness of the importance of the relationship between these acts, and one's identity did not emerge until that time. Similarly, 'life' only becomes meaningful as a conceptual and biological category after

a significant non-life force throws it into relief. This non-life force is often summarily understood to be (biological) death. But death is not quite so easy to understand and grasp; indeed, its meaning extends well beyond the historical and technological definition of biological cessation.⁵ Therefore, perhaps it makes sense to say that insofar as early ritual, theatre and performance were devoted to managing the meaning of death, that management itself involved the invention of another conceptual, biological and experiential field that came to be called 'life'.

This kind of speculation helps clarify why Live Art emerges as a specific art form most energetically in the years after World War II. The technologies of the concentration camps and the atom bomb rendered death a mechanical and impersonal event. Artists attempted to respond to these catastrophes by developing an art form predicated on the value of the singular, intensely personal, life. From Body Art to the solo monologue, performance artists made vivid the drama of the artist's own life in relation to the life of the other, be that the life of the distant witness or the life of the intimate partner.

It is against this background that we can start to assess the work of Marina Abramović. Beginning the 1970s working in Belgrade, Abramović has spent the last thirty plus years travelling the world, studying ancient and contemporary thought, and developing an unsurpassed body of performance work. The trajectory of her work mirrors and extends the achievements of performance art as a whole. But while Abramović has been absolutely central to the development of this form, she has also stood somewhat to the side of its main contentions. While much performance art, especially solo work, has aimed to consolidate the value of individual subjectivity and life, Abramović has insisted that the force of life (and therefore of Live Art) extends beyond the individual, and indeed beyond consciousness as such. Insisting that life requires and seeks periods of unconsciousness, Abramović has composed performances in which she sleeps and in which she passes out. She has also invited her spectators to use her performances as a way to become attached to their own dream cycles, inviting audiences to sleep and dream for an agreed upon time in the space of her installations.

While a shorthand way of expressing this aspect of the artist's work might be to say something along these lines: 'Abramović's art insists that the only subjectivity worth celebrating is an intersubjective and profoundly social and collective one', such a statement would not do justice to the more disturbing aspects of her art. In her early solo work, Abramović routinely placed her body in situations of extreme danger. To list just a few elements of those early pieces: in the 1974 performance *Rhythm 5*, she constructed a five-pointed star from wood shavings soaked in gasoline. She lit the star and then walked around it, cutting her hair and nails and throwing them into each end point of the star. She then lay down inside the star. When the flames consumed all of the oxygen in the inner area of the star, she lost consciousness. In *Rhythm 2* 1974,

she took drugs designed for the treatment of catatonia and schizophrenia, passing out from the latter. In *Lips of Thomas* 1975 she cut a star into her belly with a razor blade and, while she bled, whipped herself.⁶ Although some of this work may seem, in retrospect, more sensationalist than illuminating, performing these extreme acts gave Abramović a measure of all that art might contain, and offered her audience a view of her seemingly limitless passion to achieve what she set out to do. In *Rhythm 5*, for example, spectators who realised that her clothes were on fire and that she was not moving, pulled her out of the burning star. Rather than being chastened by the need for rescue, however, Abramović dedicated herself to designing performances in which her own individual consciousness was not necessary for the completion of the event itself. She said, 'After this performance, I ask[ed] myself how to use my body in and out of consciousness without interrupting the performance.'⁷ This disturbing ambition was not laid to rest until an interruption did occur that was itself more dramatic than her original conception of the performance: *Rhythm 0*.

Performed in Naples in 1974, *Rhythm 0* remains one of the most compelling performances of that fecund decade. Assembling seventy-two items on a table in a gallery with a window open to the street, and agreeing 'to take the full responsibility' for the event, Abramović invited the audience to use the objects on the table in any way they desired. These items included a feather, a gun, a razor blade, a bullet, a perfume bottle, lipstick, a Polaroid camera, a rose.⁸ RoseLee Goldberg vividly describes the scene:

As she stood passively beside the table, viewers turned her around, moved her limbs, stuck a thorny rose stem in her hand. By the third hour they had cut all her clothes from her body with razor blades and nicked bits of flesh from her neck. Later, someone put a loaded gun in her hand and pushed its nozzle against her head.⁹

In this phase of the performance, the audience divided into two distinct groups, characterised by Paul Schimmel as 'protectors' and 'instigators'.¹⁰ Abramović had contracted to do the piece from 8pm to 2am, but the protective members of the audience, seeing the violent trajectory of the crowd, asked that the performance be stopped. In the extensive photographic documentation of the piece, Abramović's eyes are filled with tears and her face conveys a resigned melancholy, to which part of her audience seems indifferent. Disconcerting and sad, these photographs remind us how easy it is to lose sight of those with whom we are close. The photographer sees Abramović clearly, but those touching her seem blind. While this performance has often been discussed in feminist terms – that is, Abramović's performance reveals, once more, the woman as passive object of desire and the largely male audience as the active and violent agents of power – this reading overlooks something more singular in the event.

Her protectors' response to the unfolding drama, and Abramović's response to their response, helped clarify the central



promise of performance art. While countless performances, both prior to and after *Rhythm 0*, have called for 'audience participation', these have tended to script the role and options for the audience in advance. *Rhythm 0* demonstrated that what makes live performance a significant art form is that it opens the possibility for mutual transformation on the part of the audience and the performers. What distinguishes performance art from other arts, both mediated and live, is precisely the promise of this possibility of mutual transformation during the enactment of the event. By accepting both her audience's care for her safety and her audience's desire to hurt her, Abramović transformed her relationship to the event. She was as moved by the performance as were any of her audience. Or, to put it differently, Abramović had the capacity to allow her spectators to transform her intended performance to such a degree that they became co-creators of the event itself.

Rhythm 0 placed performance art squarely in the ongoing post-war conversation about the ethics of the act: what does it mean to act when full knowledge of the consequence of your act cannot be known in advance? What are the costs of refusing to act without such foreknowledge? What keeps us blind to the consequences

of our actions and our passivity?

Abramović is that rare artist willing to be surprised by her own nature, as well as by ours. What surprises most of us is the finality of death. Faced with an angry and increasingly violent crowd, Abramović finished her performance but later declared that *Rhythm 0* marked 'the conclusion of her research on the body'.¹¹ The possibility that the performance might result in her death exposed, once more, how thin the line between life and death truly is.

Abramović, who has been deeply influenced by Tibetan Buddhism and shamanic wisdom from disparate traditions, learned during the early 1970s that the border crossing traversed within performances that work on the art/life divide might be seen as a kind of rehearsal for that other crossing, the one between life and death. In this sense, performances that occur on the art/life divide can serve as a kind of laboratory dedicated to exploring art's deepest mysteries – mysteries at the core of the encounter between self and other, love and bodies, life and death.

In 1976, Abramović began her twelve-year collaborative relationship with the German-born Uwe Laysiepen, known as Ulay. They began working and living together while rejecting the

certainties of spatial locations – they had no fixed address – and energetically examining the nature of the heterosexual couple. Crucial to all of these performances was an investigation of a deep love and trust, and the concrete limits of the mortal body. In one of their more haunting pieces, *Rest Energy* 1980, they stood facing each other with a taut bow and arrow between them, the arrow aimed directly at Abramović's heart. Small microphones resting on their chests amplified the rapidly rising rates of their heartbeats as the piece went on. The performance, which lasted four minutes and ten seconds, made vivid the line between life and death, and the fragility of that line as it quivered there between Ulay and Abramović for those intense 250 seconds.

Dear Marina

You and Ulay spent a year living with the Aborigines of Australia. You walked with them in the bush, sat with them in the desert sun, tasted the dead air, dreamt of water. You made yourself parched. After China and the Great Wall walk, you felt a different thirst, one for beauty, glamour and lipstick. On the cover of Artist Body you are on a beach, holding a beach ball, looking seductive. But my eye is drawn to the sea beyond you. The place where humans tie themselves to the sea's beautiful promise is called the Marina. In New York, you called your piece The House with the Ocean View. We met there on the island and we each watched the other. As I looked, my eyes burned, laughed, cried. I became untied. You asked us to enter the performance, to engage in an 'energy dialogue' with you. You asked me, a writer and a teacher, to give up talking, to meet you in silence, to become wordless. You yourself were singing. I want to give you something of the melody of our encounter for it still hums in my mouth.

Love

Peggy

One of the achievements of body art in the 1970s was that its embodiments and navigations made it impossible, even now, to discuss live performance without also talking about death. The entwined relationship between live performance and death has been at the core of the most radical art practice of the post-war period. In her more recent work, Abramović has also employed performance art as a way to respond to some of the bloodiest events in recent geopolitics. Indeed, her 1995 performance, *Cleaning the Mirror*, where she sits placidly on a stool while washing a filthy skeleton for three hours, stands behind her haunting piece, *Balkan Baroque*, for which she won the Golden Lion at the Venice Biennale in 1997. *Balkan Baroque* constitutes Abramović's response to the massive deaths in the former Yugoslavia. In Venice, she installed two large copper sinks and one copper bath filled with water in the main gallery space, where slides of her mother, her father, and herself were projected on the walls. These images were accompanied by a soundtrack describing ways to kill rats in the Balkans.¹² For four days, six hours a day, Abramović washed 1,500 beef bones, while singing folksongs from her native land. She wore a white dress and sat on the top of the

immense heap of bones. As she washed, the blood from the bones stained her dress. A haunting illustration of our often unwitting complicity in the deaths of others, *Balkan Baroque* honours the unnamed and unowned bones of the dead.

In both *Cleaning the Mirror* and *Balkan Baroque*, Abramović reminds us that contemporary war always involves an encounter with the treachery of the document, of the trace we call numbers, and a repression of the trance we call love. In contemporary war, those who decide when intervention is necessary often look at death counts before acting. These numerical documents, the calculus of how many die before, during, and after the fighting, comprise the record that will be cited and recited in historical and official accounts of war, intervention and recuperation. What is lost in such calculations is the weight, the very blood and bone, of each dead person's hope, struggle and life. Abramović's methodical scrubbing of each of the 1,500 bones touches something of the weight of that loss. While she cannot and we cannot retrieve those who are dead, *Balkan Baroque* gives the public a place to acknowledge that loss and to take measure of the grief often forgotten as the world shifts its attention from one war to the next. Given the situation in Iraq today, it is impossible not to notice the repetitious return of the story of numbers and the history of destruction and buried grief central to these catastrophic events.

But perhaps Abramović's most stunning use of performance art as a response to the politics of death and war is *The House with the Ocean View*. Characteristically, her performance responds to war and terrorism via a demonstration of love and trust. At once a performance of extraordinary vulnerability and astonishing strength, *The House with the Ocean View* asks us to revise our own relation to the tasks of everyday life. In my own case, that means the task of writing about performance.

Dear Marina

I don't really know you, but I feel as if I do. I have seen your traces: videos, photographs, catalogues. I have seen you perform live. I met you once in a crowd. You were wearing perfume and your lipstick was smudged from kissing people. You shook my hand but there was no connection ... We both moved on. I saw you once alone in Paris, but I did not say anything to you. I have lectured about your work, read wonderful books and essays about your art, and some friends even gave me an Illy espresso cup and saucer with your photo from the cover of Artist Body on it. From these bits and pieces, I have assembled some kind of history with you, but I am aware you don't have one with me – at least not one you are aware of.

I know you well enough to know you don't like to discuss the politics of your work. But these days, well ... Look, I don't want to fight with you. Please trust me just a little bit. It is tempting to say it won't hurt, but it might. Besides, we both respect pain enough to avoid making predictions about anything in its realm.

Love

Peggy

Performance art can be said to derive from three different historical traditions.¹³ The three narratives describing that history are:

- 1) Performance emerges from the history of theatre and begins as a counterpoint to realism.
- 2) Performance emerges from the history of painting and gains its force and focus after Jackson Pollock's 'action painting'.
- 3) Performance represents a return to investigations of the body most fully explored by shamans, yogis and practitioners of alternative healing arts.

All three of these modes of understanding the history of performance art are helpful to some degree. But since they each understand performance as a kind of add-on to their primary interest (theatre, painting, or anthropology/healing/spiritual practice) they also tend to give short shrift to the larger intellectual and aesthetic achievements (and failures) of performance in an expanded field. The most significant aspects of performance art's specific contribution to the history of art and the history of thought in the twentieth century extend well beyond the fields of theatre, painting and anthropology. Commenting on these three narratives of the history of performance art, Thomas McEvilley argues that Abramović's work 'is dedicated to preserving the traditional shamanic/yogic combination of ordeal, inspiration, therapy and trance'. Moreover, he astutely claims 'that this approach to performance art is both the most radically advanced – in its complete rejection of modernism and Eurocentrism – and most primitive – in its continuance of the otherwise discredited association of art with religion'.¹⁴ Geopolitical events since 9/11 have combined to make the connection between radical postmodernism and fundamental religiosity ever more urgent. In his prescient essay of 1999, Paul Virilio warned: 'The new technologies convey a certain kind of accident, one that is no longer local and precisely situated, like the sinking of the *Titanic* or the derailment of a train, but *general*, an act that immediately affects the entire world.'¹⁵ This immediacy is precisely what happened on 9/11, when the local crash of the planes into the World Trade Center, the Pentagon, and a field in Pennsylvania, set off a general set of consequences that resonated around the entire world.

Among the many consequences of this event is the need to revise our understanding of the ethical act, and of live performance's role in such an ethics. The exploration of this ethics has been at the heart of Abramović's practice for more than thirty years. As she puts it:

We are always in the space in-between, like airports, or hotel rooms, waiting rooms or lobbies, gyms, swimming pools ... all the spaces where you are not actually at home. You haven't arrived yet. You have left home but you still haven't arrived to a new home. So you are in-between. This is where our mind is the most open. We are alert, we are sensitive, and destiny can happen. We do not have any barriers and we are vulnerable. Vulnerability is important. It means we are completely alive and that is an extremely important space. This is for me the space from which my work generates.¹⁶

Dear Marina

I have just quoted you. Your words, your funny English, have just come through my fingers, out of my mouth. It feels intimate to quote you. I notice our differences. You say, 'this is where our mind is most open'. I would have said, 'this is where our minds are most open'. The plural, though, despite its generosity, curiously isolates us as well. I am trying to approach something closer to your sense of connection. 'Our mind is' conjures up an image of a shared mind, and if this is what we are after then I should probably confess that when I typed your words, I kept mistyping the word 'destiny'. You said, 'We are alert, we are sensitive, and destiny can happen', but I kept typing 'density can happen'. The word destiny is too dense for me. I prefer Irish mystics to Greek oracles. Why am I confessing this? Perhaps as a way of repeating the lessons from Breathing In/Breathing Out, in which you and Ulay blocked your nostrils and kissed until the carbon dioxide passing between your bodies made you faint. Liminality is the space between breaths, the tiny pause when one is neither breathing in nor breathing out, neither kissing nor killing, neither writing nor reading, neither speaking nor listening, neither Peggy nor Marina. In the space of the mistake, before consciousness of the mistake emerges, something lives, vibrates, shakes. Perhaps it is in the mistake, the place of vulnerability, that we are completely alive.

More mundanely, my mistaken typing is no doubt a resistance to your confidence about connection and sharing. We do not have the same mind. I want both intimacy and separation. I want to acknowledge certain points of contact and certain points of non-connection between us. I would like to develop a way to write and respond to your work, and to you, with a sincere honesty that is neither judging nor indifferent. Such honesty might bring us closer to a sustained liminality in critical thought and in the ethics of the approach to the other. Contemporary critical writing is severely resistant to the undecided and the shaded. Increasingly, criticism is reduced to the thumbs-up or thumbs-down gesture. But I need to find a richer means of response if I am to remain a writer of non-fiction, a task I am less and less sure makes much sense. You might think this is my problem, but I am afraid it is yours too.

Harold Rosenberg, writing in 1952, pointed out that in order to form a new school, one needs both a new consciousness and a new consciousness of that consciousness.¹⁷ You have dedicated yourself to performing a new consciousness, but we still need a way to write about it. I know you have gifted, brilliant commentators in several languages already. Nonetheless, maybe I can help articulate something that remains muted in the writing about your work thus far. Something to do with the heart of a woman and the thought that takes and makes no home. Am I being essentialist? Is there such a thing as 'the heart of a woman'? Probably not. But sometimes your emotional courage, the game of chicken you play with yourself, with us, seems to me to be possible only because you love, and are loved, as a woman.

*Love
Peggy*

The liminal state that Abramović has dedicated herself to exploring via performance is familiar to anyone who is, or who has spent any time with, a saint, mystic, or sleight-of-hand artist. For the rest of us, such suspension tends to be more emotional, ethical, intellectual. The inability to discern what position one should take, how one 'ought' to feel, and what one 'should' do, often leads to a paralysing sense of indecision. As the saying gets said, often with a kind of subdued rage, 'don't just leave things hanging'. But we are often hung up, and that is because we can't seem to see what it is we are between: land and sky, sea and stone, life and death. Abramović's performances invite us to join her in a liminal space, rather than demanding that we choose one side or the other. For Abramović, the architecture of liminality is fundamentally temporary, suspended, provisional.

Dear Marina

You had an idea that claimed all my attention. Indeed, it was the vastness of your idea that made me begin to want to know your story, to know your heart, to know your art. The intimacy I felt with you was rooted in my understanding of your idea of intimacy. I don't remember how I first encountered your idea. Before that, I felt you were somehow beyond my capacity to understand. I did not know your language, and the history of Yugoslavia was too dense to become my critical or creative destiny. I had been very drawn to your piece Lips of Thomas, especially when you took a razor blade and inscribed an upside-down Communist star on your belly. I thought of it as a way of putting a map of the sky on your stomach, so that later you could trace a scarred star anytime you needed a map. And I liked it because I thought of it in relation to Doubting Thomas, my favourite apostle. He was my favourite because at first he insisted that the skin was truthful and the tale was not, but then he got caught and was taught to see the truth in the skin and the truth in the dream of love. I liked the idea that you had transformed his doubt into lips. Lips that kiss and lips that eat. Lips that cut and lips that join.

I was not in love with the idea of the crowds you drew, suspected they were there for the wrong reasons; after all, our varied cultural histories display a consistent attraction to the idea of watching women bleed or whip themselves. I wondered a little bit about your psyche, too, wondered if you were a bit like some of my students, reckless with your own capacity to create. So I was interested in what you were doing, but content to hear things as they came to me, and not inspired to seek you out.

But then when I heard, or read, or however it was that I grasped the idea of the Great Wall walk, I was immediately riveted and then – well, I guess we can say I have been riveted ever since. The walk was what drew me to you. The title of the performance was The Lovers. Initially it was going to be a wedding; you and Ulay were going to meet in the middle and get married. Ha. Isn't it odd how the heart works? All that planning and then the unravelling of the impetus for the plan. I know the surprise deep in the heart that betrays our deepest breath. No wonder when we kiss we give each other carbon monoxide. But you and Ulay kept your vow to the performance, if not to each other, and from March to June of 1988 you

marched up and down the wall. Photographs show you clinging at times to the precipice, adding stones to your pockets for ballast against the sweeping winds, reversing Virginia Woolf's suicide, which she secured by adding stones to her pockets to keep her under water.

Marina, you wanted to be tied to the land, but you climbed toward the sky, already inscribed by your own star. You were apart from Ulay, but translators, drivers, photographers, aids of various sorts surrounded you. In the end, you and Ulay met in the middle, each having walked 1,200 miles, to embrace goodbye. The death of a twelve-year relationship and the birth of something, someone, else. For three years after that, you did not perform publicly with your body.

You went to Brazil to dream in the mines. Crystals. Gems. The stones beneath the sea. And then from the caves of Mina Girais, back to the air. You built An Impossible Chair, and sent it teetering against the suspense of an immense sky. You crafted crystal Shoes for Departure, enormous shoes too heavy to move. It was your time of study and repair, nesting and gestation. Then came Biography, in which you told us your art/life story with slides and music. The photos of your performances with Ulay were projected on split screens, his story and your story, in a history told and sung by you. There were snakes and dogs. Then there was Cleaning the House, and Balkan Baroque. But having said all this I have not yet arrived in the House, the one you called The House with the Ocean View.

Between Balkan Baroque and The House with the Ocean View, as the journalists like to say, everything changed. Journalists love to puff things up and bloat their own utterances – but even so, something had shifted. It called you back; it helped me leave. But first: our encounter there, where the journalists said everything had shifted. New York, the island of Manhattan. It took you a year and two months to respond to that awful day, a day when there was no time, a day that was at once deeply personal and somehow not at all about us or for us. I came to see you. I wonder if you remember ... Dear Marina, what do you remember?

Love

Peggy

From 15–26 November 2002, Marina Abramović performed *The House with the Ocean View* at the Sean Kelly Gallery in New York. During that twelve-day period, she did not eat, read, write, or speak. She did allow herself to hum and sing. She drank as much water as she wanted; she urinated as needed. She took at least three showers a day. Each day she wore a suit of different colours; magnets were sewn inside the suits. She slept in the gallery every night. During the twelve days, the public was invited to the gallery to participate in what was called 'an energy dialogue' with the artist. In two other rooms, a video of Abramović's face at the lip of an ocean played on an extended loop. One could hear the lapping of the water on the tape in the room in which Abramović performed. In another room, the public was invited to contract to sleep in the dream room for one hour. The hours were quickly contracted.

In the main space of the gallery, three small stages were built.

On the first stage there was a toilet and a shower, on the second, a wooden table and chair with an enormous crystal built into its back, and on the third stage, there was a simple bed and Abramović's clothes and mattress. These three stages were raised about six feet off the ground, and they were buttressed in the centre by three ladders with butcher's knives serving as rungs. The side of each stage had an opening, allowing the artist to walk horizontally between the three rooms. In addition to the glass and water pitcher, there was also a metronome tapping out the passage of time, and sometimes pacing Abramović's breathing. In the back of the gallery, a telescope was set up, focused to a magnification that made it possible for the audience to discern each hair of her eyebrows.

Dear Marina,

It was you and I knew it was going to be you, but I did not know which you you would make me become. Yes – make me. I did not want to change. I rarely want to change. You stood there, daring me, inviting me, commanding me.

You. Me. The crowded room. The energy in that space. The weight of you changing right there in front of my eyes. Herb Blau wrote that in theatre, as in life, someone is always dying in front of your eyes. My eyes are fading. You kept me waiting. There I was, feeling the mounting energy, seeing that energy, molecule cells dancing in a petri dish dyed and cast so that I could see them grow like stars in the night sky, like the light I feel – even now I feel – fading.

Should we have faded then and there and left it at that? You are very dramatic, and I have been given to creating scenes myself. You don't go in

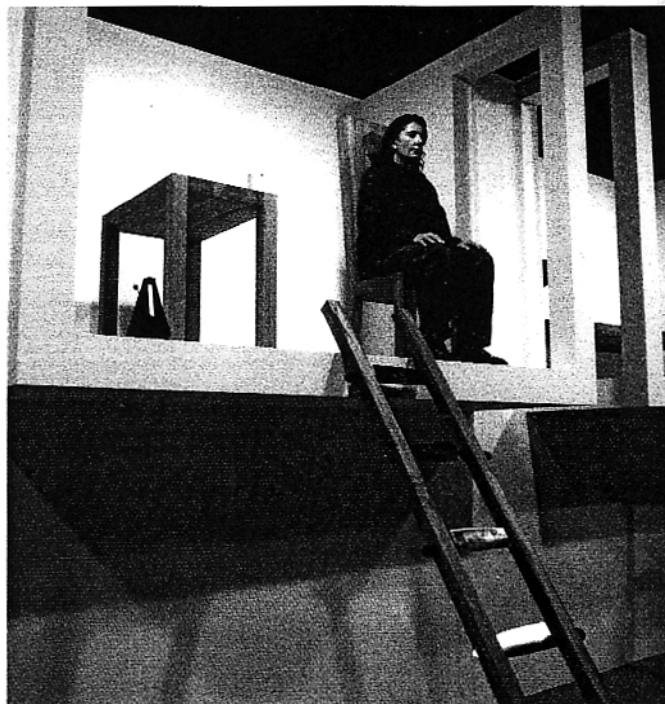
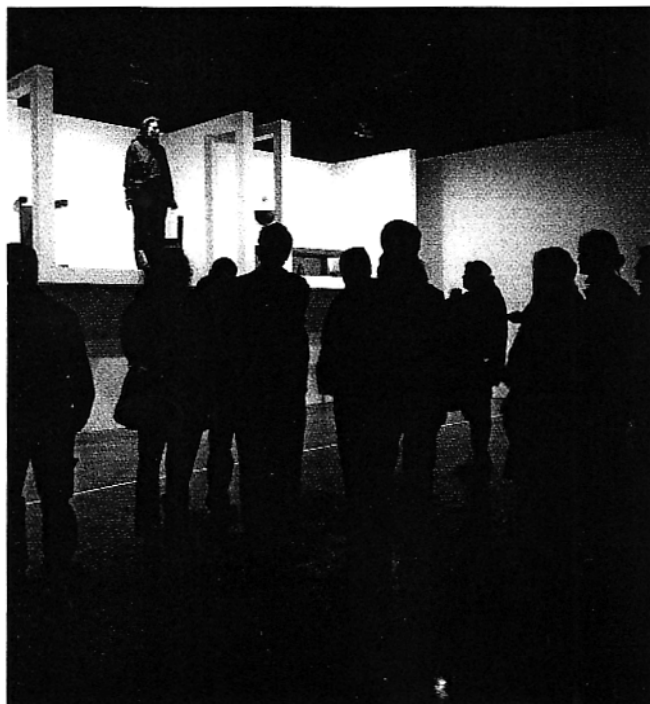
for subtlety or the slipping away of things. You like grand gestures. Heroic scenes. You walked for three months along lengths of the Great Wall of China and you told everyone that you did it in order to say goodbye to your lover. I did not believe you. There were too many cameras, too many negotiations with too many governments, too much money, too many steps – I still hear them: one crunch, two crunch, breath breath breath – for me to call that walk a goodbye. You walked across the Great Wall of China, becoming at last the daughter of your soldier father. And now here we are and still the soldiers are marching and dying in a theatre of war in which everyone is dying in front of our eyes.

But I am long blind.

I waited there that day – day eight for you, day one for me. The previous seven days I was not in the city. I was teaching in Massachusetts. Looking for a new home in California. I had not yet arrived.

It was raining out. I was exhausted. When I entered the gallery, you were doing your theatrical stuff, humming songs, looking dramatic, although also a little bit vacant, distracted. Hungry but not in an active, growling way. We both knew it was not so difficult, not really, not in relation to the monks of Tibet who sit in caves for ten years, not in relation to the truly starving, not in relation to other situations of intense and unchosen suffering and pain. But you did it anyway and I came anyway, because we knew things had changed.

I sat on the floor in the back. You sat in the middle of the second stage, your bare feet draped casually over the second rung of the butcher's knife ladder, staring into space, a little dull-eyed. You looked a bit like an animal in a cage. I thought of Kafka's Hunger Artist. Then a group of children came in and rushed right to the front of the room and lined up across a



white stripe I had not seen before. You seemed immediately happier, hosting your young and vibrant guests. I was worried that you would stand up and your feet would bleed with the pain of the butcher's knife. I watched you closely and in one gesture you were on your feet, back on the stage, your feet unharmed. I could not work out how you had done that. Levitation? A quick transfer of weight from foot to arms? The children looked at you, and you looked at them one by one. It was quite beautiful to watch. Some of the children were scared and left quickly, but one girl, a plump girl on the cusp of adolescence, was transfixed, and I watched your eyes will a kind of strong love into her. She met your gaze with confidence and also open curiosity, claiming your steady attention and easily returning it. Soon though, her teacher came and took her by the arm to pull her away.

After she left, you looked depleted. I waited for someone else to take the girl's place at the white line. You moved to the back of the second stage and leaned against the wall. No one came forward. You drank some water, had a pee, and then took a shower. You put on your clothes, and this time you put on your boots. I recognised those boots from the photographs of the Great Wall walk. I thought about the nature of distance. There you walked across vast geographical terrain. Here you were attempting another kind of ambitious performance, but this was not across geographical space. It was into the interior of your own muscle, skin, bone. We were invited to help shape that walk, but in the end it was yours. You had turned our faces into the ocean from which you would drink, bathe, float away.

You went back to the second stage and leaned against the wall. I felt a little bit sorry for you. I looked at my watch and saw it was 5.50pm. Since the gallery closed at 6, I trusted myself to have an energy dialogue with you for ten minutes. I wanted to help you through the last minutes so you could

be rested before your long night alone in the gallery. I slowly walked up to the white line where the girl had been. Immediately, our eyes met, locked.

I was taken aback by the intensity, the density of your eyes. It was a different gaze from the loving one you had given the young girl. It felt aggressive. Before long, I was sweating. You slowly came off the wall and began to walk towards me. As you walked, my body began to shake. My left buttock began to tremble. I became extremely self-conscious. The gallery was crowded and I was worried that everyone was staring at my one jiggling buttock. But you kept coming closer, and the closer you came the more I shook. I had entered the space of yet another mistake.

Then I saw that you were shaking too. You came right to the edge of the stage and you were shaking so hard I thought you might fall off. I began to panic. I began to imagine being blamed by the whole international performance art world for making you fall off the stage before the twelve days were up. I decided to focus all my mental energy on getting you to return to the back wall. Mentally, I was very strong; I was startled by the force of my focus. My head was burning. My body was a mess. I could not stop shaking or sweating. I felt weak and disgusted to be so weak, when you had not eaten for eight days and I had eaten just before I arrived. I wondered if maybe you were so hungry that you were determined to turn my body into liquid, some kind of high-energy drink that would get you through the next days of your performance. At first I resisted the idea of being converted, but then I began to think it would really be quite a spectacular destiny and maybe that was part of your point – that this performance I had just declared your interior walk was actually a complicated kind of alchemy, whereby I would be emptied and you would be filled. All of this was running through my head, as were theories of aggressiveness, narcissism, exhibitionism, voyeurism, questions about love and sacrifice, surprise about how what I thought was a fairly dull and passive waiting had turned into a genuine drama. And against the music of these thoughts was the dull hum of self-consciousness because others were seeing me falling to pieces. But you would not budge from the edge of the stage, even as you trembled on the lip. Lips of Thomas. Would we betray each other? Whose skin would be opened in this encounter? Who would be saved? Who would be hurt?

I was beginning to feel irritated with you. Couldn't you see it would be better not to stand there shaking? Better to walk back and lean against the wall, as I willed you to do? And then I was stupid and angry with myself; after all you had been training for this sort of thing for years, and I had not trained for one minute. You knew your limits much more intimately than I knew mine. How could I have imagined that I could help you, since you were a master and I a novice at these feats? I remembered all my failed attempts to meditate. If I could not do it alone in private, how could I attempt to try to do it with you in this hot, crowded public gallery? I felt embarrassed. I wanted to offer you something but I could not find anything to give you. The postures and positions in my head were exhausting me, but even so I felt I could not look away from the density of your eyes. They were not quite as aggressive as when I first approached, but they were still boring into me. I decided to try just to watch and trust that you would not fall. I decided to let my mind run and not to focus on guiding you back to the wall.



Almost immediately you surprised me and lay down on the stage, your whole body now supported by the wooden floor, but your face suddenly very close to mine. Our eyes remained locked for what felt to me like a very long time.

In our look what passed between us? Stories. Images. A kind of hallucination, real facts and real fictions. But not narratives so much, more like photographs of memories. My dead lover. My saved brother. The building heaving up before it crashed down. The telephone calling. The widow's walk. Gradually the whole day came flooding back to me, the feeling of drowning in an event whose density still cannot be fully taken in. I remember walking, going to give blood in the morning with all the other lost New Yorkers. I waited in line for what seemed forever, the ashy smoke and acrid smell floating over the city. Finally when I reached the beginning of the line, my blood was rejected. I had been in London a few months before and they were worried about mad cow disease. Hurt they would not let me bleed, I walked the city blind. I went to the river, looked way west, saw New Jersey in the smoke. Wondered if there was enough water to put those fires out.

In the thick of my recollection I began to ask what was prompting it? Were these thoughts yours or mine? They were the details of my day, but why had you summoned them without a word on this day? Or were these the things lying in wait for me once I stopped talking and writing and reading? Were these images somehow something I was trying to give you? A gift of a day you missed in the city, even though I was sure that wherever you had been that day you had also somehow been present? 'The new technologies convey a certain kind of accident, one that is no longer local and precisely situated, like the sinking of the Titanic or the derailment of a train, but general, an act that immediately affects the entire world.' In this condition of generality, time and space begin to flow into one another. I was drifting away from my own consciousness. There was a kind of reversal occurring between us, in which I was giving you what you missed and you were giving me the chance to be absent from what I had experienced. I was not sure who I was becoming standing there, looking at you vibrating right in the centre of what I could see, but looking at you as if from your own eyes, blind again in my own. It was a strange metaphor for the situation of the couple, the ways in which we insist we can be intimate with strangers, those we sleep next to and those we do not recognise in the mirror. Insisting on intimacy sometimes blinds us to the utter otherness of our very selves. Who was Marina? Who was I? Were we some consolidated ciphers for the more dramatic encounters that occurred on 9/11? Or was I, once more, mistaking my own tears for rain? Was I trying to inflate something into an ethical drama that was really not 'in' the event, but rather imposed upon the event by my will to interpret? After all there is almost always more difference at play than we can acknowledge. Maybe this constant doubt and questioning is what makes love love. The fantastic energy released by love might actually be motivated by a kind of terror that we will have to know each other, when in fact we much prefer our fantasy of one another, even when those fantasies lead to a kind of annihilation of one another.

All of this and much more passed between us. You looked and I saw, saw it all again. There was more too—but much of it still resists words. More than that, there are some things that should perhaps remain unsaid, because they are dangerous secrets and because they are truly mysteries. I repeat something passed between us. Also other things. I was still sweating but my body was no longer shaking. I was sort of floating now, in the ocean that flowed between our eyes. I kept waiting for the gallery staff to come and announce that the gallery was closing. But no one came.

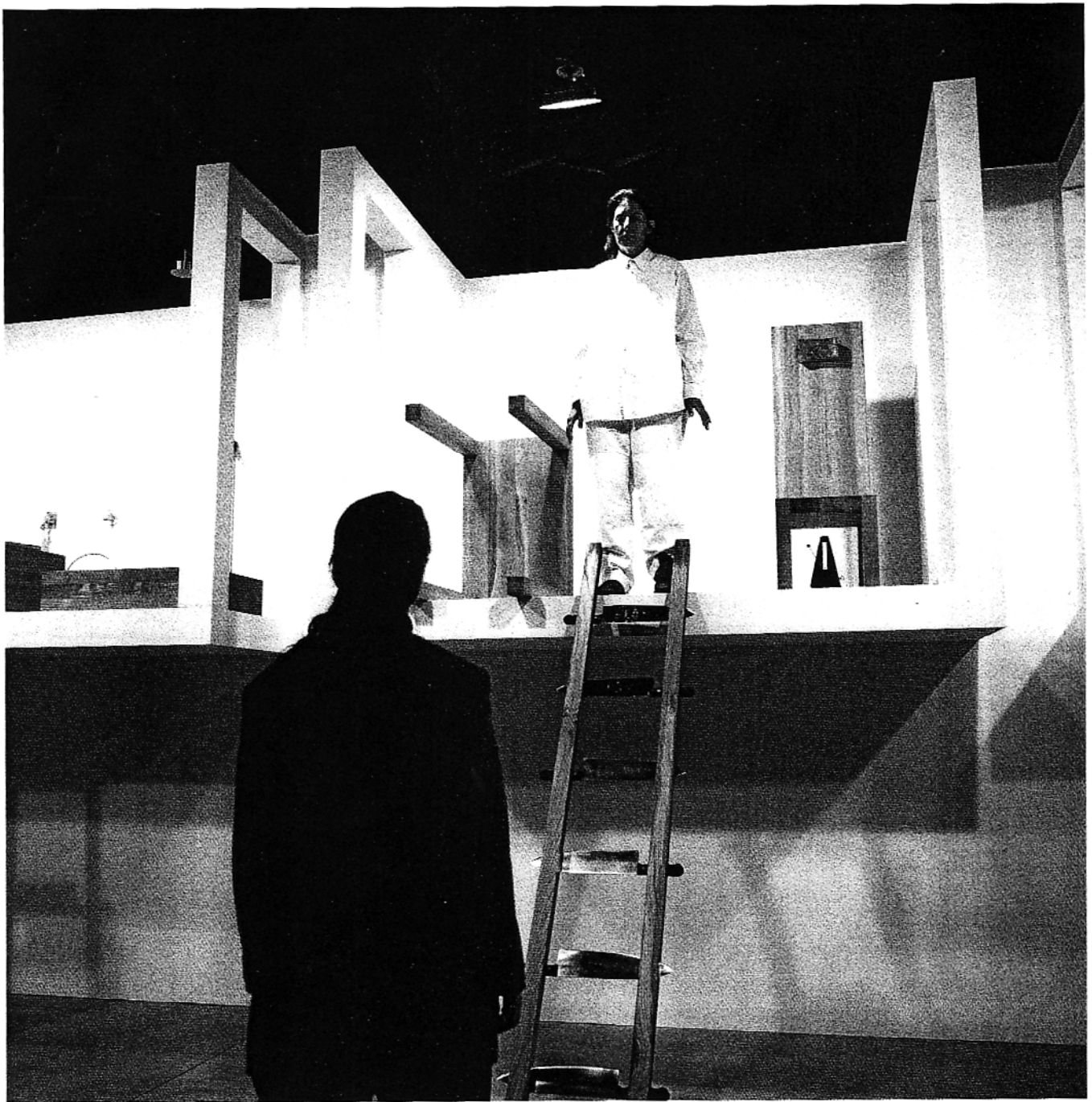
Just when I thought my body might give out entirely, you smiled at me. A smile that was deeply personal and also liberatingly impersonal. I kept my eyes locked on yours, still waiting, but now without an expectation of a 'for'. I looked at you and your head fell forward, over the edge of the stage, to the right of the ladder. This was the first time you looked away from my eyes. Our exchange had ended. I quickly turned away and went to the rear of the gallery. I collected my coat and went out into the rain. When I looked at my watch it was a few minutes before 7pm. I later learned that was the one evening that the gallery was open until midnight. I walked for a long time, grateful for the rain.

Love

Peggy

There was no object. There was a kind of fused subjectivity, a condensation of the main themes of psychic, emotional, and perhaps spiritual, development. It passed through and touched on aggression, surprise, trust, fear of betrayal, fear of annihilation, acceptance, connection, beauty, exhaustion, transformation. The strength of it still surprises me, not only because I remember it so vividly, all these months later, but also because at the heart of the performance was an embrace of simplicity. Stripped of plot, object and verbal dialogue, the performance nonetheless produced a potent ethics, a drama of the relation between self and other unaffected by the usual rhythms that help us maintain the distinction between strangers and intimates. Such a drama poses considerable risks, for both the artist and the viewer. Faced with the choice of looking away or looking back, one realised there was a cost for each choice. Moreover, accompanying this realisation was the recognition that this is precisely the economy in which we often try to live and love. Endlessly weighing what to let in and what to ignore, we measure and are measured by these everyday calculations. But phrasing it in this way risks making Abramović's performance more conscious, indeed more calculating, than it was. It was not, in the end, a narrative performance, and in that sense, *The House with the Ocean View* resists critical commentary even as it begs for more words after all that silence.

Jacques Lacan famously claimed that love is a giving of what one does not have.¹⁸ On the last day of the performance, Abramović came down from the stage and told the gathered crowd that she wanted to come to New York to give the busy island time. Time to heal, time to think, time to love, and time to live, despite death, with death. It is not that people have not died elsewhere, or that people



have not died before and since 9/11. But that act, that falling of so many, has made it hard for so many people to walk. To climb upstairs is to remember the fire-fighters burdened with their hoses and axes; to walk downstairs is to remember those fleeing the towers; to look out of the window is to see them flying, already ash before they landed. *The House with the Ocean View* was an invitation to look at things from another perspective. To think about other wars, other attacks, to think about love in the face of hate, to feel time in the history of the eyes of those still living.

This performance reminded me that I want to live so I might have time to think about, to write about, to give time to, our performances, rituals, theatres. This essay is one fruit of that giving, written about an hour when there was no time, spoken now in this moment, wordless but flowing. My sweat an ocean, her eyes a kind of terrain. From this a history, from that a world. A world in which architecture does not seek permanence, and art objects are not valued exclusively for their price. A world in which what is made between our efforts to see and our inevitable blindness counts as art. We can call it performance, we can call it presence, or we can call it time. But in the end it is life.

Life, like the trance we call love, might begin with a look, a glance, an exchange between eyes. Learning from this life energy, live performance takes place face to face. It is intimate and it occurs in public. It breathes, it sweats, it ends. It begins again. It passes from you to me and I hope back again to you. 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.

1

A version of this text was given at *Live Culture*, Tate Modern, London, March 2003. In that presentation, each of the italics sections in this text was prefaced by excerpts from Philip Glass's score for the movie *The Hours*. Additionally, the talk was accompanied by slides of Abramović's work, many of which were projected repeatedly and often with the orientation reversed. A webcast of this talk with the sound and slides can be found at http://www.tate.org.uk/onlineevents/archive/live_culture/live_conference.htm

2

For a fuller discussion see Allan Kaprow, *Essays on the Blurring of Art and Life*, ed. Jeff Kelley, Los Angeles and Berkeley, 1993, and Linda Montano, *Art in Everyday Life*, New York and Los Angeles, 1981.

3

The central texts in this argument are Arnold van Gennep's *The Rites of Passage*, trans. Monika B. Vizedom and Gabrielle L. Caffee, Chicago, 1960, and Victor Turner, *The Ritual Process: Structure and Anti-Structure*, Chicago, 1969.

4

Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality: Volume 1: An Introduction*, trans. Robert Hurley, New York, 1980.

5

For a fuller discussion of death as a social and cultural event, as well as a biological one, see Jacques Derrida, *Aporias*, trans. Thomas Dutoit, Stanford, 1993.

6

All of this work, which is more complicated than these brief descriptions suggest, has been documented in the remarkable catalogue, *Marina Abramović: Artist Body, Performances 1968–1998*, Milan, 1998.

7

Ibid., p.69.

8

The other items were: blue paint, comb, bell, whip, pocket knife, spoon, cotton, matches, flowers, candle, water, glass, scarf, mirror, chains, nails, needle, safety pin, hair pin, brush, bandage, red paint, white paint, scissors, pen, book, hat, handkerchief, sheet of white paper, kitchen knife, hammer, saw, piece of wood, stick, bone of lamb, newspaper, bread, wine, honey, salt, sugar, soap, cake, metal pipe, scalpel, metal spear, bell, dish, flute, band aid, alcohol, medal, coat, shoes, chair, leather strings, yarn, wire, sulphur, grapes, olive oil, rosemary branch and an apple.

9

RoseLee Goldberg, 'Here and Now', *The Artist's Body*, ed. Tracy Warr, London, 2000, p.246.

10

Paul Schimmel, 'Leap Into the Void: Performance and the Object', *Out of Actions: Between Performance and the Object, 1949–1979*, Los Angeles, 1998, p.101.

11

The Artist's Body, p.125.

12

The complete soundtrack and further documentation of *Balkan Baroque* can be found in *Marina Abramović: Artist Body*, pp.364–70.

13

See Thomas McEvilley, 'Stages of Energy: Performance Art Ground Zero?', *Ibid.*, pp.23–5 for a superb discussion of these three narratives.

14

Ibid., p.25.

15

Paul Virilio, *Politics of the Very Worst, An Interview by Philippe Petit*, trans. Michael Cavaliere, ed. Sylvère Lotringer, New York, 1999, p.12.

16

'On Bridges, Traveling, Mirrors and Silence: An Interview with Marina Abramović', (April, 1998), Pablo J. Rico, *The Bridge/El Puente*, Milan, 1998, p.50.

17

Harold Rosenberg, 'The American Action Painters', *Art News* 51, no.8, December 1952.

18

Jacques Lacan, 'The Signification of the Phallus', *Écrits: A Selection*, trans. Alan Schneider, New York and London, pp.281–92.