

PURE RAW

Performance, Pedagogy, and (Re)presentation

Marina Abramović interviewed by
Chris Thompson and Katarina Weslien

Marina Abramović has been pushing the limits of performance for over three decades. From 1965–70 she studied at the Academy of Fine Arts in Belgrade, and soon after that at the Academy of Fine Arts in Zagreb, where she later taught. In 1970 she began working with sound environments, film, video, and performance. Five years later she met the artist Ulay (Uwe Laysiepen) in Amsterdam, with whom she worked until 1988. Together they devised performances that centered on the limits of human endurance, consciousness, and perception. Working independently since then, she has exhibited, performed, and taught internationally, establishing a body of work whose combination of extremity and intimacy is singular in the history of performance. In 1996 she completed two important theatre pieces, *Biography* and *Delusional*, and the following year her controversial performance *Balkan Baroque* won the International Venice Biennale Award. She received the Niedersächsischer Kunstpreis as well as the New York Dance and Performance Award for her recent performance/exhibition *The House with the Ocean View* at the Sean Kelly Gallery. For her November 2005 exhibition at the Guggenheim Museum in New York, *Marina Abramović: Seven Easy Pieces*, she will re-perform seminal works by Vito Acconci, Joseph Beuys, VALIE EXPORT, Bruce Nauman, Gina Pane, as well as her own *Lips of Thomas*, and premiere a new performance. This interview is based on three conversations with the artist, the first of which took place in October, 2004 (Amsterdam), and the other two in April, 2005 (New York), around the time of her participation in the “(Re)presenting Performance” symposium at the Guggenheim Museum.¹



THE IDEA OF THE COLLECTIVE

THOMPSON: In reading the transcripts from the catalogue for the 1990 “Art Meets Science and Spirituality in a Changing Economy conference,”² I was struck by your notion that that there could be some blend of Buddhism and communism. Is this an idea you have continued to develop over the past decade?

ABRAMOVIĆ: It's really not developed or thought about; I come from communist country, so communism is something that was very close to me. I know the idealism of communism in the beginning, and I know the failure of communism in the end, and I know all the problems, and why it could not succeed. It was a very interesting concept in Burma; at one point, it was a communist government and a very strong Buddhist country, so in the government there were Buddhist monks. Again it didn't work. So all these concepts don't work because the mentality and the consciousness of people are not raised to the level that could make it work. The solution is really that we have to have a completely different relation to the materialistic world, and not to be attached to money. So it's very complicated because in communism, in the beginning, everybody is the same and we all have the same things. But soon, if you are able to buy two toothbrushes instead of just having one, you will do it. Then the entire communist society was nostalgic, looking to America—who has the wealth, the great cars, and TV sets and so on. So that's the whole thing. At one point it was interesting to me that communism could work in Sweden, because the level of the society was quite high, and everybody has the television, everybody has the cars, so there was no kind of need for that. But again it doesn't work. It's really about rethinking how we can raise consciousness. Only by changing ourselves we can change others. And that is a long, pioneering process.

THOMPSON: Over the last couple of days I've been talking with your friend Louwrien Wijers about the way that her Compassionate Economy project has developed.³ In one of the project's recent symposia in New Delhi, the participants talked about economist Adam Smith, and noted that there really has never been capitalism in a genuine sense, because according to Smith the idea is that the market can only work if the buyer and seller come with equal power and information. That has never happened.

ABRAMOVIĆ: Yes.

THOMPSON: And also this idea in Marx, from very early on—it's a lot like Joseph Beuys's idea of "Everyone is an artist"—that the ideal society will be one where each individual could be his or her own artist.

ABRAMOVIĆ: But I also don't believe in Beuys, that living through art we can change society. I really think that deep spirituality is the real key, and not art. Art is one of the tools, but not the only one.

THOMPSON: Looking back at this whole series of projects and researches through Art Meets Science, what becomes interesting is the idea that this is also a history of making a collective—individuals who are committed to an endeavor that doesn't have a definite form. It's not like a movement, but maybe a collaboration to try and change consciousness in some way. How do you imagine using the tools afforded by art to actually build such a collective?



Top: Marina Abramović, *Portrait with Scorpion (Closed Eyes)*, 2005, black and white photograph; Bottom: Marina Abramović, *Lips of Thomas*, performance in which Abramović froze, beat, and cut herself, Galerie Krinzinger, Innsbruck, Austria, 1975.
Photos: Courtesy of the artist and the Sean Kelly Gallery, New York.



ABRAMOVIĆ: It's such an enormous process, and I think, in a way, right now everybody is so disconnected with their own fields. We have to try our best in our own fields. And then at one point, consciousness rises in art, it rises in science, it rises in technology; in a way, the connection will be a completely natural thing. I think that the process can't be forced. Everything needs a certain time. And bad time is very important, to have bad time, and right now, really, things are going bad. I think they have to go not only bad, they have to go worse, because they have to go all the way down in order to find the thing that is radiating from that bottom. It's always the same, like after the rain comes the sun—this kind of thing. It's very much Buddhist thinking but it really proves to be completely true. So that there are certain causes and effects that have a bigger picture than we can perceive. We have to find the tools which will bring us to this bigger picture, and find the art in it, which actually is our function. That's the world most people really don't know: what is the function, why they are there in the first place—I mean here, on the earth. Finding your own function, and then fulfilling that purpose, is very important. That connection will come. So I really don't believe in a kind of revolution with a man—genius—coming and changing everything. It's a tyrannical concept. Because one person can't do anything. Everything is an interactive process, and everybody has his own role so that the machine can run.

THOMPSON: How has your encounter with the Buddhist community actually impacted your thinking in these matters?

ABRAMOVIĆ: That question goes back a long, long time, basically since the end of the seventies. It really helps me in working as an artist. I have to enlarge my consciousness about things. So I have different ways of dealing with Buddhism. There are practical things I can do to help the Buddhist community. I am doing choreography for them. I have done lots of work in that field. There was a benefit, supporting one monk child, giving the money every month so he can have an education—I mean, really very down to earth kinds of things. It's a really rewarding feeling to do something that doesn't flow from your ego, but is for somebody else. I'll just tell you two of my experiences with the Tibetans. They were so wonderful. I was in Bangalore with Lama Daboom Tulku, who is the director of Tibet House, the political and cultural institution in Delhi. He had invited me at the request of the Dalai Lama to choreograph the Tibetan monks for the Festival of Sacred Music.⁴ And for this, for the first time, the Dalai Lama had the idea to have 106 monks who would be chanting all together from the five different Buddhist sections—also with female monks, who have never been together with male monks in this sort of a situation before. So I ended up in a huge monastery of seven thousand Tibetan monks, trying to do choreography with them. I was thinking: What kind of image would facilitate this? Because, you know, this is a festival, so you have many groups working together, you have to change very fast.

THOMPSON: So how did you do that?

ABRAMOVIĆ: We got a huge hall, where they normally have their food, and we exercised for one month. I was thinking, let's make a human pyramid, with a reconstruction of the Buddha structure on the back of the benches, so they can come in, and then they all sing together the Heart Sutra, which will be really like an earthquake with all these voices. Then I exercised with them, and we got it so that it took less than thirty seconds to enter, less than thirty seconds to exit. It was one month with lots of lagging, because they're not used to that kind of speed, that European, Western timing. We had a great time, and we really succeeded in making this pyramid. And then when I was leaving the monastery to go and set up the scenography in the theatre where this performance was going to be, the director of the monastery said to me: "Oh it is so nice, you work so hard. We really appreciate it. But we never can do pyramid."

I said: "What do you mean?"

He said: "Because in Tibetan Buddhism there is no hierarchy."

I started to cry. I said: "Why wouldn't you tell me from the beginning, so we could do something else?"

He said: "But you are the guest. We can't offend you."

Then I was in the car with Lama Daboom Tulku, and I was really crying. He held my hand and he said: "Just let it go. This is the perfect moment to learn non-attachment. Just let it go." And then, you know we come back to work, the monks performed, and in the end everything went well, it was just different than I had imagined. In fact, afterwards, His Holiness the Dalai Lama actually thanked me personally for the work I helped to create.

THOMPSON: You had also done a project with a group of Tibetan monks for the performance at the Haus der Kulturen der Welt in Berlin.

ABRAMOVIĆ: Yes. A year later, I went to the monastery, again invited to do choreography, and I have 12 monks, and I work with them very hard and we make a rehearsals, and they are supposed to come to Berlin to make a performance, about three months later.⁵ I was going to bring them to my academy to meet them with my students, and also to rehearse this dance, and then they would do this huge event where we would use the video and different light and lots of technology. Finally they arrive, and of these 12 monks I only recognize one. I said: "Who are these guys? We never rehearsed with them." He said: "But they are the ones with the passports. The ones you rehearsed with did not have passports." So it was again the same thing. It was wonderful, you see; that's unbelievable. Now I was really prepared to make a go. In four days we had to pick up everything and make it possible, and so it was possible. The idea of our society that we have to fix things and things have to be a certain way, then you don't see the flow, you don't see how the whole energy goes,

and how things are actually unpredictable. The same is true with life and death. I mean, this moment we are talking and this is the present moment, but the next second this whole roof could fall and you're dead. So it's uncertainty that we have to learn. That the only thing there is is the present. Working with the Tibetans is like the best school I could have for my own work.

THOMPSON: How do you translate this learning of uncertainty into a mode of approaching performance?

ABRAMOVIĆ: The performance is a process. The public as well as the artist has to go into it. They must meet in a completely new territory, and build from that timeless time spent together. That's very important. Because you need that time so that something can really happen as a performer. But the public also needs time for something to happen to them. Because they need time to adjust. I'm totally against all these short performances—two minutes, three minutes. It's really feeding an audience who doesn't have time. I don't have time in my life, but I have time in my performance. I always have time in my performance. And Ben [d'Armagnac] was so much about this. I did the piece just now in New York.⁶ It was wonderful. I was rushing like crazy, doing this and that, making last telephone calls. I go to my ladder, I go up, and from one second to another, I had all the time, days and nights. It was amazing. And really, that's the only way I can see: to have time is to create time in performance.

THOMPSON: I think that in teaching that possibility is there. I had an amazing class the other night where the students took over. They decided that—

ABRAMOVIĆ: What? "A revolution will happen tonight!"? What do you mean they took over?

THOMPSON: We had read a couple of texts for that week's class, and each week a group of students, four or five of them, leads a discussion. So they decide how we'll talk about it. They said that, instead of me teaching, what they were going to do was this: They would read one passage aloud, then we'd take five minutes to just sit. And then after that, anybody could talk. But after each person talked, we had to wait a full minute before anyone spoke or responded, and continued the entire class in this manner.

ABRAMOVIĆ: So, wait—so you read the passage, and then five minutes you're just silent.

THOMPSON: Yes.

ABRAMOVIĆ: To reflect, sure . . .

THOMPSON: Because you realize quickly that often times what happens in conversation is that you feed off the energy of the person who is speaking, or who

has just spoken; you turn that around and it informs your speech. But if you don't have that, if you have to sit for a minute, then you have to decide what's worth saying. You're also cognizant that after you're done, no one else can talk for a full minute, so you have truly to measure what you say.

ABRAMOVIĆ: What was the text?

THOMPSON: It was an essay by Gilles Deleuze, called "Mediators."⁷ It's a remarkable essay, one that he wrote near the end of his life. It drifts from subject to subject but the key idea is this notion of the mediator—it doesn't have to be a person, though often it is a person, like Félix Guattari with whom he wrote.

ABRAMOVIĆ: They are very much interested in the whole idea of nomadism; I also love Virilio so much. To me his work is very appealing.

THOMPSON: One of my favorite books is his *Pure War*.⁸

ABRAMOVIĆ: I have it—it's an important book.

THOMPSON: But the idea with the mediator is that, like you were saying, you have to have this impossible situation in order to make something. You have to create a situation where it's a real struggle, or else you're not really making something, but simply repeating.

ABRAMOVIĆ: But what you are teaching? History of art?

THOMPSON: Technically it's art history, but today that means a little bit of everything.

ABRAMOVIĆ: I am just resigning this month. I am making the IPG, Independent Performance Group. With these students I want to work more; really my role is as a curator, and as a connector, to give information. They've been performing around, at P.S. 1, last summer they were at the Venice Biennale. I'd really like to have all of the experiences and connections I have already as an artist for more than thirty years, be available for them in their own field. And now, I don't want to teach, because when you teach, there are always new people coming, and you are always at the beginning, and the ones who are really good, you can't go further with them. Now I have this group, and I wanted to make it as high level as possible. And that's it. You have one life, you have to decide! So, then, I made this book⁹—it was the biggest book ever made about students, I think. For the IPG, my idea is to get a factory place in Brooklyn. And I want to have the same thing as Andy Warhol but without drugs. I want to have a real performance laboratory space. So we are going to invite you. We can talk, we can attack you, you have to defend.

THOMPSON: Defend for real, or just with words?

ABRAMOVIĆ: Ah?

THOMPSON: I always thought that it would be nice to have a bit more physical struggle present in academia.

ABRAMOVIĆ: The book is just answering questions. Three-hundred thirty-five questions I answer. Every student can ask anything. Including: Can you kill for your student? That was interesting.

THOMPSON: It's important to have teachers like that.

ABRAMOVIĆ: My teachers were horrible. Everything that happened to me, I do not want to happen to them. It's simple.

INVENTING THE INSTITUTION

THOMPSON: As teachers in the same graduate program at the Maine College of Art, Katarina and I are interested to know your thoughts about what it means to begin an educational institution for artists now. In the broadest sense, given all the things one could invest in, in teaching and learning and art making, what things really matter to you?

ABRAMOVIĆ: So, what is the first question?

WESLIEN: I think, really, what matters for you as an artist right now, and also what matters as you're teaching younger artists?

ABRAMOVIĆ: First of all, for me, the institutions right now, at least the ones I've been teaching in, are very limited. I think that we need some kind of larger reconstruction of institutional life. I can't talk about education in America, because though I've done several courses and some lectures around American schools, that doesn't mean that I know the system. But I teach in France and Germany, Japan, Italy, Yugoslavia—generally in Europe. So, let's say that the institutions in Germany and England are probably the best. In Italy it's a completely nineteenth-century structure. The Italian is a very interesting system; in Italy, they still, in the first year, are literally painting after the models—how you call it, the sculptures of Michelangelo—and they copy paintings. What for me is very interesting is that the Arte Povera artists, really one of the best movements in Italy, never took the position to become teachers in these academies and change the structure from the inside—except Luciano Fabro, who was the only one but who didn't really teach. I was always interested in why this happened. Sometimes they say, "Oh, you know, we never were invited." But if you're not invited, you can make your own alternative school, or you can do something in that kind of direction.

THOMPSON: How did your experience teaching in Germany contribute to this conviction?

ABRAMOVIĆ: In Germany,¹⁰ different institutions still retain this very classical distinction between the studies: there is painting, there is sculpture, there is graphic design, architecture and fashion, or whatever, and then there is multimedia. And this multimedia is very messy stuff, because whatever is not coming into these categories is multimedia. I think that now artists are much more clear about whether that means performance, whether it means working with the digital; the “media” is much more clear.

I was in Germany for a long, long time, and I was trying to teach my class—the category was called *raumconcept*, it means “space-concept.” A space-concept can be anything, you know! So I was surrounded with students in any kind of category. And it was really a mess. We spent about three years in *raumconcept* before it was through the media school, finally, that I could really get to the performance group. And I got a true performance group. Then I asked the university to change my position to Performance Studies. I became the only performance professor in the entirety of Europe. And then, you know, I found out that when I was teaching that actually I had to deal with so many problems, of how to teach performance, and how to address the space in the best possible way; first, in the entire structure of the academy, so much goes to administration, and so much to things that you have to apply for, et cetera, that really make you unable you to work fast and to make things happen. But I got somewhere on my own. I made some kind of small revolution in the academy. When I found the limits were too high, I decided that it was best to stop teaching, as I have done, and form the IPG where I can be much more flexible and move much faster with them.

THOMPSON: Did the revolution sustain itself after you left that teaching position?

ABRAMOVIĆ: What happened in the academy, as soon as I left, is that they immediately went back to the *raumconcept*, with the explanation that performance is very old-fashioned, and it should not exist as a single program. It totally banished the situation. But actually in my class I had 40 students from 21 countries—they would come from Japan, Russia, from whatever, you know, different countries, just to study in this program because there’s nowhere else to study. But, they went back to completely the same structure as there was always. So I felt very frustrated that I was not able to change anything. That was the situation in Europe. Also within the structure of the academy, there was this attitude that students are not supposed to show their work outside of the academy. I totally disagree with this. I think that if you absolutely think that you have a good idea, it should be shown regardless of your age or the limits of your study.

WESLIEN: How, with this history that you spoke about at the “(Re)presenting Performance” symposium at the Guggenheim,¹¹ do you inform students of this era of performance, so that they’re not just reproducing what’s been done—like the *Vogue* images that you showed there—but rather have a thorough understanding of what is really at the root of what you do, and other performance artists as well?

ABRAMOVIĆ: In my case, I have taught for over 20 years. I decided not to teach. I can’t really teach anymore. I decided that I want to take care of the students who went through my teaching, and have spent six or seven years with me. I wanted to really be responsible for the destiny of those students, and these students should actually carry the ideas and try to change the rest. I cannot take care of that by myself.

WESLIEN: But that’s like an apprenticeship in a traditional sense.

ABRAMOVIĆ: It is! I think that’s how it should work. This generation shows that that kind of system works. Because if you take care of everybody, you don’t take care of anybody specifically. But if you have to make something very strong, it can spread. And that’s what I’m doing. So I have these 42 IPG members, and we made the book *Student Body*, and now I am in a position of curator, a position of archivist—because I have all the materials, the position of somebody who can introduce lectures at the workshops of their work, making all kinds of contacts for them with galleries and other infrastructures, so that they can actually succeed in their work individually. And that is the only way I can help—today, unconditionally. I would hope that other artists have the same attitude with their own students, because I don’t see so much generosity around.

STAGING (RE)PRESENTATION

WESLIEN: We’re eager to talk about the “(Re)presenting Performance” symposium; what, for you, was the most valuable thing that came out of that event as you look toward preparing for your November performances at the Guggenheim?

ABRAMOVIĆ: The symposium didn’t go the way I was wishing it would, because for me the reason to have the symposium was to have the opinions of other scholars, and have my generation of artists and younger artists reach the terms that we should take for addressing the “re-performing” of performances and what that means. Are we allowed to do it? Is it something new? And if we are doing it, is it correct to do the piece that has been done once and maybe should not be repeated? And if we decide to repeat it, what are the conditions under which it must be done?

In the end, all the young artists made their talks about their own work. It was in a way really monologues about different subjects. To me the most interesting talk was by the woman, Carole Stringari, who was in the Conservation Department at the

Guggenheim. She's conserving Eva Hesse's work, and she was saying that you must destroy it. Eva Hesse didn't give any instruction during her lifetime about how the conservation should be done if the work is in bad condition. So now they have to make the choices and they have to make the compromises. That's such a delicate thing, how far you can go in the compromise without changing the meaning of the work, and how much living artists have to be aware of that and give as close instructions for preservation of that kind of work as possible. What is our responsibility once we are not there? Those things are the most interesting.

I think that Babette Mangolte addressed interesting issues about filming, and the choices the filmmaker makes and not the artist, and how sometimes these materials can be entirely different—the information you see during the performance as a viewer and the information you get as a documentation afterwards. Then there are no other witnesses, so this is the only material you have to relate to. So everything becomes mystification. Then Germano Celant was talking about whether repetition is just repetition, or whether you are making your own work through it. I mean, these are issues I would like to know about, and to discuss, and see all the different opinions, and we didn't have that.

THOMPSON: How does your approach to the re-performing of performances compare to how theatre directors approach the re-presentation of theatrical productions?

ABRAMOVIĆ: The main difference is the context. The two are very different. When I did *The Biography Remix* in Avignon this July, it was presented as a theatrical performance, and it had a huge success in that context. I wondered why this would be so? I think that it is because for years now we have been taking elements from performance into the theatre, and now it has become possible to see it. The question comes down to the difference between performing and acting. I am a performer, not an actor. For me, performance is something that is not rehearsed, and is not staged by a director. In performance there are no scripted cues or stage settings; it is pure and raw.

THOMPSON: So what is it about this particular grouping of performances that compelled you to choose them over others, and to re-perform them in the context of the artworld today?

ABRAMOVIĆ: The performances I chose were made by artists who were very active and important, but whose seminal works I was not able to see in person. There was the Chris Burden piece that I had hoped to do but which has not been possible. The choice for me came from the fact that the pieces had really struck me deeply, but had done so only through photographs and the little documentation that one could find at that time. This has always interested me, and I have wanted to ask how would I deal with them now, in real time?

WESLIEN: There seems to have been a missed opportunity in that you and Carolee Schneemann¹² didn't have a public conversation about that period in the history of performance. I think you started that off-stage a bit. Is that something you'd be interested in doing?

ABRAMOVIĆ: In a way, I would like to have a conversation with all of them. After the symposium, I thought that it couldn't present the body of the book that I had envisioned. The Guggenheim curators agreed. So I will go on with making some kind of questionnaires and try to approach directly the artists with the opinions I am interested in and talk to them. The symposium comes and goes. It doesn't need to be something definitive. The catalogue has to be something that is going to stay, and I want to make sure that in it all these questions are addressed and have very different opinions from different generations of artists.

THOMPSON: I'm wondering why you didn't choose to re-perform one of Carolee Schneemann's works?

ABRAMOVIĆ: Apart from her *Interior Scroll*, I understand her work as having more to do with the history of painting and of installation. I respect her work enormously and I like her very much as a person. However, the work did not deal with the amount of danger, and with the pushing of physical limits, that I was after for myself.

THOMPSON: It seems that much of the dynamic of re-presentation is really a question of translation. That is an interesting model for thinking about what it means for, say, a filmmaker to document a performance, which is really reinventing that event in a different material. There are certain elements that are always untranslatable, but then something else can be made anew.

ABRAMOVIĆ: Yes. Germano [Celant] said a really interesting thing, when you're re-making Manet paintings, you're not making Manet, you're making something else. And that is really what is the interesting point to discuss.

WESLIEN: For audiences re-experiencing these re-performances there will be interesting questions raised about seeing them again. In this way we're almost anticipating the response to you doing Vito Acconci's *Seedbed*. I think the future of what you are doing is going to present some really interesting questions. What do we actually mean by "live performance"?

ABRAMOVIĆ: One thing that is also important is for the people—except the ones who are dead—whose pieces I am performing to be invited to see them. I had that discussion with VALIE EXPORT. For me this witnessing and then talking, between the person who made the piece and the one who reproduces it, is extremely important.

HOW TO KILL FOR A STUDENT

THOMPSON: I wanted to go back to the question that we discussed briefly back in October when you were telling me about your book *Student Body*. In that book you wrote, in response to one of your student's questions, that in the right set of circumstances, you could actually imagine killing for a student. In a more recent interview, you mentioned that one of the great challenges of the present really is to try to imagine a way of being in the world without killing one other.¹³ How do you reconcile those two things? How does it become possible, on the one hand, to have the kind of intimacy—with a student, or with another artist, or a friend—that actually lets you be prepared to kill for them?

ABRAMOVIĆ: But what do I answer in the book, when I'm asked: "Can you kill for a student?" I didn't say that I would kill. What had I said? I don't remember now—

THOMPSON: That in the right set of circumstances, you could imagine—

ABRAMOVIĆ: Ah! That I believe that each of us can be a killer. That definitely it is really the circumstances that makes a killer or not, and how that human nature can be transformed. I am totally against violence and killing and everything. But I can see, sitting here, a peaceful situation; what if your child is killed in front of you, and you have the opportunity to punish the killer, what would you do? I mean, that's something that we just can presume, but we never can say for sure. I talk about this situation in my performance *Balkan Baroque*, when I am telling the story of how in Yugoslavia we make the "wolf rat."¹⁴ This is exactly the kind of metaphor for every society anywhere. How can you imagine that one of these women, from the "normal" midwest, a woman soldier, goes to Iraq and finds herself enjoying torture? I mean, what makes her do that? How is this happening? What is happening within our nature? The only way for this not to happen lies in avoiding the circumstances that will lead to it.

THOMPSON: I'm wondering whether it's possible that we can only have real intimacy if we're prepared to realize that we might be called upon to have to kill to protect it.

ABRAMOVIĆ: But, you see, this is such a difficult question to answer. Susan Sontag tried to answer it once. Her question is: If a million people have been killed in Rwanda, and then by killing a few hundred you can spare a million, what would you do? It's exactly the question. You know, if you can, by killing a certain amount of people who cause the killing of a million in Rwanda, and save a million lives, do you do so, or do you just let these people kill one million people and not do anything? So what would be your answer? You kill two hundred but you save one million.

THOMPSON: Yes. I think—

ABRAMOVIĆ: Or you do nothing.

THOMPSON: —that would probably be my answer.

ABRAMOVIĆ: Which one? To kill two hundred? Instead of a million. See, that's how we become killers. It's such a catch-22. You know, it's not easy at all to answer these questions. In a way, of course, you know, you and me, whatever, we don't like violence, we are against killing and all the rest. But this is all coming from the comfortable situation when such a moment does not arise. If such a moment arises, different laws appear.

WESLIEN: I'm wondering, if we take this conversation into a teaching model, how does one teach about this? What is the most difficult thing that one can really teach? I know that you are teaching now and have the IPG. What is the most important thing for you, do you think, to teach these students?

ABRAMOVIĆ: It's a very simple thing. First they have to know who they are. Because there are so many people, they presume they are artists, they presume they are good human beings. In the end they find out that apart from their enormous big ego, they don't have talent and they really are not great human beings. So what do you do then? I teach them to understand who they are. From that point, only, you can see what direction to take. And then we build on that. But that's really important—to expose them in extreme situations when their nature can come out at its best, to get them to expose themselves.

WESLIEN: How do you begin that exposure?

ABRAMOVIĆ: You know, it's really interesting. You put people in the group, and put them in a difficult situation—like without food, and without talking, and doing very heavy exercises—a very unpleasant situation with it extremely cold, and they have to sign contract with me that they can't go away, and they have to go through this. You can see immediately which people really are for the community, which ones try to cheat and do anything possible to leave, and other ones who don't have any motivation at all, even though they know that this is the training for the performance. It's amazing, you have a complete gallery of different characters. You immediately can check who is determined, who, now that it matters, has this kind of concentration, and who does not.

WESLIEN: In a situation like that, do you think that there are certain boundaries that one should never cross? Do you set up certain parameters for yourself as a teacher, taking a group of students into a situation like this? Do you have a place where you know that we can go so far, but we won't go any further?

ABRAMOVIĆ: For me, the important thing is safety. First, to start to do this—you can see in my book *Student Body*—they can't be bulimic, anorexic, take prescription drugs, have depression. They have to be just really healthy people. That's the number one condition. A second condition is that I will never do anything to hurt them in any way, and I will never propose a situation where a group can get hurt. Because if I do performances on me, that's my problem, and I am dealing with that. But even if they get extreme ideas, they can't do it if I'm present, they can do it during their own lifetime as independent artists, and take their own responsibility, but not while they are also called my students. So that is very important. And at the same time, it is important for me not to lie to them, no matter what. And to be very radical and honest. That's the set of parameters—very important to me.

WESLIEN: Have you ever made a mistake in that as a teacher?

ABRAMOVIĆ: No, I really didn't . . . if I remember, in Sweden, there were two people who in the middle of the night of the third day of not eating, thinking that I don't know, went out in the middle of the night and walked several kilometers to the next village to get a beer. Then they came back and I locked the door. They could not believe that I wouldn't let them in, because it was really freezing and they already walked seven kilometers. I didn't let them in, so they had to walk back, and I was thinking they could really be frozen or whatever. And I didn't care. I really didn't care. I knew that they had to learn their lesson. They went back to the village. The next year they were the first ones to apply, and stayed all the way through the workshop. So sometimes you have to say no to things. Otherwise the whole system will collapse.

WESLIEN: What are the current activities of your students?

ABRAMOVIĆ: They have something like seven international shows, working in different places. Right now they are going to perform in the Hebbel Theatre in Berlin in May, then they are going also to perform in Avignon just after I finish my *Biography Remix*, directed by Michel Laub. Then they perform in the Cartier Foundation in Paris. I am discussing in the fall an event of one week at The Kitchen, here in New York. Because you see, it was my idea to do this re-performing, and I asked them to re-perform in my theatre piece. But I am very encouraging of them developing their own work and their own schedules. I am mostly in the function of curator in their lives, showing to other curators their works, and trying to place it in the best possible exhibitions or festivals, or whatever I can. So every three months they have to update their own curriculum with their own ideas, so that I am always informed with the new material and what's going on. But right now most of them are performing in the Van Gogh Museum until the 19th of June. It is an enormous amount of energy, eight hours a day. As we talk, there is always one person performing eight hours a day.



Top: Marina Abramović and Ulay (Uwe Laysiepen), *Relation in Space*, performance in which the artists' bodies moved past each other and then collided at speed, XXXVIII Venice Biennale, Venice, Italy, 1976; Bottom left: Marina Abramović, *Rhythm O*, 1974, performance in which Abramović placed 72 objects on a table and invited visitors to use them on her as desired, Studio Morra, Naples, Italy, 1974; Bottom right: Marina Abramović, *House with the Ocean View*, performance in which the artist lived and could be watched by the public for 12 days in the Sean Kelly Gallery, New York, 2002. Photos: Courtesy of the artist and the Sean Kelly Gallery, New York.



THE QUESTION OF DOCUMENTATION

WESLIEN: It's interesting to think of your students in terms of what we were talking about at the symposium, with a performance theorist like Peggy Phelan insisting that the essential characteristic of performance is its liveness, and that in its re-presentation it ceases to exist as performance and becomes another form of documentation instead. It is intriguing to question how you could re-present these re-performances for your students.

ABRAMOVIĆ: First, I always wonder how can the theoreticians say this when they never use video to show the performance work? They just read the texts and show the slides or whatever. I found this disgusting. I hate Powerpoint. I mean, how can you ever show the liveness of performance in slides?

WESLIEN: I agree with you.

ABRAMOVIĆ: One next better thing is video documentation. Because you have the sound and the movement and you have a sense of feeling what happened. But if you have slides, how can you represent the cinema or the movie with a frozen image? You can't. I don't understand, but every single person here in America, I never see them showing video. I only see them showing slides, of something that is not possible to be seen by slides. And then commenting on how representation doesn't work—of course their representation doesn't work. But I can tell you, there are so many pieces for which it works. That's why, with the work I was discussing at the symposium, *Art Must Be Beautiful*, I was so furious that the documentation was so stupid and the camera was going up and down. I didn't like it. Straight after the performance I made one more time the entire performance just for the documentation, to have it right. Now when you see this piece, it is right, and you can get the sense of it. And if you have been there or not been there, it is still much better than seeing one slide. We have to be practical. I think that there is no way that millions of people can see one piece. What if somebody in New Zealand wants to see it? Then he should be able to have very good documentation. Documentation is extremely important. So many artists have the attitude that it is not. I have every single piece documented and I honor every video, because I have a very early, very strong feeling for the historical document. That's important. I teach my students the same. They are incredibly well-documented in their early works.

WESLIEN: What about this issue raised by some of the photographers who shot Beuys when he did his work, who are now claiming those images as their own artwork rather than calling it the documentation of his work? Has that happened to you at all?

ABRAMOVIĆ: For me, it's a constant fight. They don't want to give you the negatives, and so on. So I am constantly finding and refining possibilities and solutions, coming up with papers that say that I have all the rights. But one thing—in the beginning, Beuys said himself that he was not interested in documentation. If

it was nice he would take it, if it was not, he would not. And in a way, later on he was sorry. I was always interested in documentation. I will always suggest a camera position and how it should be done. I really think that the artist's responsibility is enormous. It's not just making the idea. It's finding the way to present the idea in the best possible place, in the best possible time, and then to take care of all ways in which this idea will live through documentation. You have to, already, before you start it, understand if the documentation should just be one photo, or should be video, or should be installation, or should be the mix of different elements. Because that will be the final work to be presented to the public later. That's the incredible responsibility we have to have. If you saw the retrospective of Joan Jonas, it was interesting because she also used some parts of her clothes from the performance, some of the photographs, and she even made some small scale maquettes, and so you have a feeling of how it was. You have to make a little reconstruction—otherwise what are we talking about? We are talking about one photograph we don't even like that somebody else made from some corner. I mean, then it gets completely out of balance.

WESLIEN: Have you thought about how to record your upcoming performances at the Guggenheim? I am struck by how much you have thought it through.

ABRAMOVIĆ: I think so much about it. And I really wanted to have different points of view, like you have different ideas of recording and how it's going to be. I mean, you see light, it's very difficult with the light, there's not much shadow. What kind of sound? Because there's very bad acoustics in the Guggenheim. I am busy for days having talks with the technicians, and getting suggestions. Because this piece I will never repeat ever again, it's once in a lifetime. It's just to prove the point, that's all. It's like a kind of deductive piece, almost. I wanted to put some kind of questions in the history of performance. And I want it to be right. But also, there's another question I was thinking of: You create these images, they become photographs, so what you do with them? Are you going to sell them as your own artwork? I have decided absolutely not. These photographs will be only documents, they will never be artworks. They will never sell or gain money from something that I didn't make. So I am now creating contracts with all the examples of my attitudes about this stuff. I will make sure that the titles and dates and the places I re-perform are right. This is something that I want to pay enormous attention to.

WESLIEN: Now, when you worked with Vito to redo this piece, what was his reaction?

ABRAMOVIĆ: Oh, he was delighted! You know, they—Mike Kelly, Paul McCarthy—already did it. He's used to being re-performed.

WESLIEN: But not by a woman.

ABRAMOVIĆ: Oh, that's true.

WESLIEN: I think that's going to be a huge difference.

ABRAMOVIĆ: Yes. But to me, it doesn't matter. I didn't make the choices because one is a man, one is a woman, I just made the choices because I think the pieces are good.

THOMPSON: Were there other pieces that you very nearly considered doing, but then decided not to? Was there a sort of shortlist of performances that you were eager to do but then decided that for whatever reason you wouldn't?

ABRAMOVIĆ: I made a compromise with *Lips of Thomas*, because there's no way I can do *Rhythm 0* [a six-hour performance at Studio Morra in 1974, this involved Abramović placing 72 objects—ranging from a pen and scissors to a loaded gun—on a table and inviting visitors to use them on her “as desired”] in this country because of the law. The museum will not let us do it. I went through the lawyers and all kinds of long conversations, so this is compromised. And the second one is Chris Burden, who I wanted to do very much and I could not. I would be very interested if you can try—good luck—to find out why Chris Burden doesn't want these pieces to be re-performed. I was not lucky enough to get an answer.

WESLIEN: We were just in Los Angeles in January, the week he resigned from teaching—

ABRAMOVIĆ: Yes, I was reading all the articles.

WESLIEN: —one of the students came in and shot off a gun. I think that the mythology can't get away from him.

ABRAMOVIĆ: First, Chris Burden was not even there. It was not even his class. And the gun was not real. I mean, it's so ridiculous this whole thing about Chris Burden. I think he just wanted to resign. Many people have this opinion. But what I wanted to know is why he doesn't want these pieces to be re-performed. He didn't respond to the Guggenheim or me.

WESLIEN: I would imagine that, if you think of the work he's doing now, which is so far removed from the work he did in the performance sphere, it seems to me that he might just want to bury that work, rather than always be living through it.

ABRAMOVIĆ: But to me the idea is that performance has to live. If it doesn't live, it dies. And then it has to have the conditions for how to live. Anyway—so that's the moral.¹⁵

NOTES

1. This symposium, held at the Guggenheim on April 8–9, 2005, sought to explore the critical, theoretical, and historical implications of re-performing, re-presenting, re-documenting

performance. Its participants included Abramović herself, artists Janine Antoni, VALIE EXPORT, Tehching Hsieh, Carolee Schneemann, Rirkrit Tiravanija, performance theorists and historians Amelia Jones, Peggy Phelan, Rebecca Schneider, curators Dan Cameron and Chrissie Iles, and a range of other thinkers, artists, filmmakers, critics, and conservators. Conceived in part by Abramović, its intention was to begin dialogues that will take shape around her *Seven Easy Pieces* at the Guggenheim in November.

2. Abramović was one of the participants in the 1990 AMSSE conference in Amsterdam, together with David Bohm, John Chamberlain, General Idea, H.H. the XIV Dalai Lama of Tibet, Stanislav Menshikov, Ilya Prigogine, Robert Rauschenberg, Lama Sogyal Rinpoche, Tim Rollins and K.O.S., and many others. Transcripts of the conference sessions are published in Louwrien Wijers, ed., *Art Meets Science and Spirituality in a Changing Economy: From Competition to Compassion*, London: Academy Editions, 1996. See also *Art Meets Science and Spirituality in a Changing Economy*, Amsterdam: SDU Publishers, Gravehenge/Stiching Art of Peace, 1990, which includes interviews with all of the participants as well as a number of others (including John Cage) who were unable to attend. The AMSSE project traces its origins to the 1982 meeting between Joseph Beuys and the Dalai Lama in Bonn, and Robert Filliou's 1985–86 Art of Peace Biennale in Hamburg, both projects with which Dutch artist and writer Louwrien Wijers was intimately involved. The tapes from the 1996 AMSSE conference in Copenhagen have yet to be transcribed.

3. Wijers is currently working on this project, which evolved out of the AMSSE initiative, together with various economists, including Stanislav Menshikov, Jairam Maresh, and others. She has been a friend of Abramović since the late 1970s, when they were introduced by the performance artist Ben d'Armagnac.

4. Concert by Monks of Tashi Dhargye was held as part of the Festival of Tibetan Culture at the Karnataka Chitrakala Parishad in Bangalore on August 23, 2003.

5. This performance, entitled *Monks of the Tashi Dhargye Monastery, India*, premiered at the Haus der Kulturen der Welt in Berlin, December 14–15, 2002.

6. Abramović's *The House with the Ocean View* was at the Sean Kelly Gallery in New York from November 15–December 21, 2002. She lived in the gallery from November 15–26.

7. Gilles Deleuze, "Mediators," in *Incorporations*, edited by Jonathan Crary and Sanford Kwinter. New York: Zone, 1992, pp. 280–96.

8. Paul Virilio and Sylvère Lotringer, *Pure War*, New York: Semiotext(e), 1983.

9. Marina Abramović, *Student Body*, Milan: Charta, 2004.

10. From 1990–1991 Abramović was Visiting professor at the Hochschule der Kunst, Berlin and Visiting professor at the Académie des Beaux-Arts, Paris. From 1992–1996 she was Professor at the Hochschule für Bildende Kunst, Hamburg, and in 1997 was Professor at the Hochschule für Bildende Kunst in Braunschweig, Germany.

11. During the first part of the Guggenheim symposium the previous afternoon, Abramović had a public conversation with curator Chrissie Iles. Abramović had shown digital images of fashion photographs from *Vogue* magazine that mimicked precisely the stills from *Relation in Space* (performed with her partner Ulay in Venice in 1976), as an example of the problems of appropriation—these were re-staged without permission.

12. Schneemann was one of the symposium participants, and had a public conversation with Dan Cameron, Senior Curator at Large at the New Museum. On Saturday, similar discussions were held between artist VALIE EXPORT and Maria-Christina Villaseñor, Associate Curator of Film and Media Arts at the Guggenheim; and artist Tehching Hsieh and Frazer Ward, Assistant Professor of Art at Smith College.

13. Steve Cannon and Alicia Chillida, "Three-Way Interview with Marina Abramović," *A Gathering of the Tribes*, <<http://www.tribes.org/cgi-bin/form.pl?karticle=26>> [accessed May 26, 2005].

14. As part of her *Balkan Baroque*, performed at the Venice Biennale, 1997, Abramović told the story of the wolf rat:

I'd like to tell you a story of how we in the Balkans kill rats.
We have a method of transforming the rat into a wolf; we make a wolf rat.
But before I explain this method I'd like to tell you something about rats themselves.
First of all, rats consume large quantities of food, sometimes double the weight of their own bodies.
Their front teeth never stop growing and they have to be ground constantly otherwise they risk suffocation.

Rats take good care of their families.
They will never kill or eat the members of their own family.
They are extremely intelligent.
Einstein once said: "If the rat were 20 kilos heavier it would definitely be the ruler of the world."
If you put a plate of food and poison in front of a hole the rat will sense it and not eat.

The Method

To catch the rats you have to fill all their holes with water, leaving only one open.
In this way you can catch 35 to 45 rats.
You have to make sure that you choose only the males.
You put them in a cage and give them only water to drink.
After a while they start to get hungry, their front teeth start growing and even though, normally, they would not kill members of their own tribe, since they risk suffocation they are forced to kill the weak one in the cage.
And then another weak one, another weak one, and another weak one.
They go on until only the strongest and most superior rat of them all is left in the cage.
Now the rat catcher continues to give the rat water.
At this point timing is extremely important.
The rat's teeth are growing. When the rat catcher sees that there is only half an hour left before the rat will suffocate he opens the cage, takes a knife, removes the rat's eyes and lets it go.
Now the rat is nervous, outraged and in a panic. He faces his own death and runs into the rat hole and kills every rat that comes his way. Until he comes across the rat who is stronger and superior to him.

This rat kills him.

This is how we make the wolf rat in the Balkans.

15. We wish to thank Barak Olins, archivist for the Maine College of Art MFA Archive Project/Moth Press for helping to facilitate this project.

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