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Exhibition Reviews

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Exhibition Reviews

'The Abramović Method'

PAC Padiglione d'Arte Contemporanea, Milan (*March-June 2012*)

Elena Biserna

> *The observer must become a participant, because that is the only way he can have the double experience of being the observer, and being the observed.*
> – Marina Abramović[1]

I made an advance booking in order to participate in Marina Abramović's 'performance', to experience first-hand *The Abramović Method*: the special project the famous Serbian artist created for Milan's PAC Padiglione d'Arte Contemporanea (curated by Diego Sileo and Eugenio Viola). Although the event includes recent video installations by the artist, it was already clear from the press release that it does not qualify as a traditional exhibition. Rather, it is a participatory project to be experienced directly.

Participants were asked to sign a disclaimer and a contract agreeing 'to take an active part' and to stay for two hours, the entire length of the piece. We were ushered in to one of the PAC open rooms by assistants, where we were then asked to place our watches, handbags, mobile phones, MP3 players, and any other electronic devices in a locker. We were given white coats to wear – a sort of vestment ritual that marked our access to a different dimension. We took seats in one of the 21 deck chairs reserved for us in front of an LCD screen, ready to listen to an introduction to the 'method'. Unfortunately, we were not among the 'lucky' few who were able to experience the method during the opening days, when the artist was present. Therefore we had to make do with a video in which Abramović and her two assistants demonstrated the experience we were soon to abandon ourselves to.

The artist described the project's conception and design – presented as 'a kind of summary of all the knowledge I have acquired over 40 years of work: to bring the public to the point of experimenting for themselves' – while the assistants guided us through a series of physical exercises and energetic rituals designed to open

our senses and prepare us to truly live the experience. These exercises included breathing, relaxation, balancing – simple guidelines for acquiring self-awareness that would be familiar to anyone practicing yoga or other such disciplines. We were also given detailed instructions for relating to the three different kinds of 'objects' that we were called on to experience: chairs, copper towers, and beds with black quartz crystals. We were asked to remain still with our eyes closed, wearing sound-proof headphones and waiting in a single position (sitting, standing, or lying down) until the assistants led us to a new location.

The public had the opportunity to observe us in two different ways: closely, with the naked eye, or from the balcony through special bird-watching telescopes, which allowed them to linger on the details of our bodies and enjoy a microscopic view of our behaviour. The 'pieces of furniture' that hosted us were minimal sculptural presences made of natural materials (wood, copper, etc.), each of which exposed us to the therapeutic qualities of minerals (tourmaline, quartz, amethyst, etc.) or, in the case of the towers, magnets. Participants spent 30 minutes in each of these 'prepared' pieces of furniture. Although initially distracted by the sounds of the audience on the balcony (muffled, but not obliterated by the headset) that rendered explicit our temporary condition of being observed, we were eventually drawn into the silence and singularity of the experience. After 90 minutes we were 'awakened' by the white-coated assistants, brought back to the original room, and asked to leave personal written accounts of the 'method'. It was only then, after the artist's intended 'physical and mental transformation', that we received the promised certificates of completion in which Abramović thanked us for our 'trust and commitment without which this work would not be complete'.

To understand the meaning of this project it is necessary to step back and view it against the background of the artist's recent research. Marina Abramović has been making the rounds on the international art scene for more than 40 years, in the process establishing herself as one of the major players in the world of performance art. *The Abramović Method* was created at a crucial moment in her artistic career, a phase in which she was appraising her previous research and investigating the relationship between artist and spectator. This occurred between the monumental retrospective *The Artist Is Present* (the 2010 MoMA exhibition that definitively crowned her – if there had been any doubt – as one of the giants of mainstream art) and the recently-announced foundation of MAI, the Marina Abramović Institute for the Preservation of Performance Art (scheduled to open in Hudson, New York in 2014 and designed by the acclaimed architect Rem Koolhaas[2]). In fact, the 'method' is a sort of dry run for the preparatory process the public will be asked to undergo at MAI, a centre for producing durational art, training performers, and educating the public, in addition to preserving the heritage of performance art.

Fig. 1 *Marina Abramović, The Abramovic Method, exercises for the preparation of the public, PAC Padiglione d'Arte Contemporanea, Milan 2012*
©Marina Abramović by SIAE 2012, courtesy Marina Abramović, photo: Laura Ferrari

MAI represents Abramović's final effort to canonise performance art as a part of mainstream visual art and is the fruit of her ongoing research into the preservation and re-presentation of ephemeral artworks from the 1960s and 1970s. After consecrating an experimental and methodological development platform in *Seven Easy Pieces* at the Guggenheim Museum in New York in 2005 (which featured the re-enactment of seven historical performances by artists such as Valie Export, Gina Pane, and Vito Acconci), this research led to the 'live re-performance' of five of her most celebrated works in *The Artist is Present*.

The Abramović Method project is also intimately connected to the MoMA exhibition. In the first room of PAC, viewers are welcomed by a monumental multi-screen video installation documenting *The Artist is Present*. Furthermore, the exhibition concludes with an excerpt from Matthew Akers' feature documentary of the same name (winner of the Panorama Audience Award at the 2012 Berlin Film Festival) that retraces the preparatory steps for the New York show, also decisively establishing the artist as a glamorous celebrity icon.

At first glance, the 'method' appears to be quite distant from *The Artist is Present*. The body has always been Abramović's medium *par excellence* throughout her career. However, at the MoMA exhibition, the presence of the body was multiplied, ubiquitous even: as a referent in videos, photographs, and documentation of her historical performances; as a surrogate in the re-performances staged by other performers for the entire duration of the exhibition; also as an 'authentic' presence in Abramović's longest performance ever, which provided the focus and title of the show. In this crowning performance the artist remained motionless while seated, offering her presence and gaze to all of her spectators for the over 700 hours that the exhibition lasted. Visitors were invited to sit before her and to remain as long as they liked.[3] *The Artist is Present* was a testament to self-control,

willpower, and concentration; it expressed a desire to identify the artwork with the artist – though it also became a semi-religious celebration of the artist's cult following, of ambiguity, and of the constant oscillation (typical of performance) between a denunciation of the objectification of the subject and the spectacle of the self.

In contrast to Abramović's first performances (which were focused on self-destructive, exhausting acts and the use of the body to test her physical limits through pain and effort), *The Artist is Present* is structured around contemplation, presence in the here and now, and the abandonment of action in order to experience a state of immobility and retreat as a gateway to a meditative state of perceptual and mental alteration. In *The Abramović Method*, however, it is precisely the artist's 'authentic' physical presence that is denied, while the contemplation and permanence in the present that is at the centre of the New York performance is instead required of and delegated to the public. However, this is by no means a sudden shift in the artist's focus, a belated recognition of the public's role, or a new desire to create participatory situations. Rather, *The Abramović Method* condenses and translates into practice multiple stimuli and elements that recur throughout the artist's work, particularly since the 1990s.

Fig. 2 *Marina Abramović, The Abramovic Method, Standing structures for human use, PAC Padiglione d'Arte Contemporanea, Milan 2012*
©Marina Abramović by SIAE 2012, courtesy Marina Abramović, photo: Laura Ferrari.

A relationship with the public has always been a fundamental concern from Abramović's first performances. The public's role became crucial in *Rhythm 0* (1974), where for six hours the artist offered herself to audience members, permitting them to freely act on her defenceless body using 72 objects of their choice – including a

knife and a loaded pistol. This role is no less necessary, however, in her other works from this era. Unlike other artists, who often created their performances alone in their studios and then presented them in a different space and time through videos and photographs, the Serbian artist's research in the 1960s and 1970s was always linked to an unmediated relationship with the public – in the present and in real time; it was dependent on what she calls an 'energy field', created by the connection between artist and audience. [4] According to Abramović, 'What's very important about performance is the direct relationship with the public, the direct energy transmission between public and the performer'.[5]

The Artist is Present represents the outcome of an attempt to render this relationship and energy transmission individual and personal. In the 'method', on the contrary, the artist is absent, replaced by ritualistic objects generating energy transfers and magnetic fields in accordance with a line of research that is perhaps less well-known, but which has proceeded alongside Abramović's performance pieces since the late 1980s. This research seems to find its final fulfilment in the Milan event: the *Transitory Objects*. In these works, the artist's body disappears while the objects are made into vehicles of experience through their use by the public. The *Transitory Objects*, as the artist likes to remind us, are not sculptures meant for contemplation; they have no aesthetic autonomy. Rather, they are functional objects created to be inhabited, provided with instructions for their proper use by the public, and 'produced in a series…so that the greatest possible number of people can use them'.[6]

Fig. 3 *Marina Abramović, The Abramovic Method, Bed for human use, PAC Padiglione d'Arte Contemporanea, Milan 2012*
©Marina Abramović by SIAE 2012, courtesy Marina Abramović, photo: Laura Ferrari.

Starting with the first experiments in this direction, the objects have been designed in close connection with the three basic body positions that are explored in the 'method' (standing, sitting, lying). They take the form of chairs, beds, tables, and minimalist towers through which the public is exposed to the energising action of crystals and magnets. *Black Dragon* (1989) consists of three mineral 'pillows' set in the wall at head, genital, and heart height. Audience members are invited to lean against and press their bodies onto the stones, waiting for the energy transmission. The same line of research has also given rise to the *Energy Clothes* – clothing designed by the artist and equipped with magnets. In a similar fashion, these accessories (pointed hats, bands, etc.) seek to trigger a process of physical and mental transformation in the audience by combining colourful fabrics (each selected to elicit a different state of mind), unusual forms, and the power of magnets.

Purification, concentration, endurance, isolation and self-control rituals are also at the centre of many workshops that the artist has led in several art academies and exhibition venues. In these workshops, Abramović presents fasting, silence, sexual abstinence, and physical and mental exercises as basic tools for preparing the body for what she calls 'cleaning the house'[7] and achieving a state of receptivity and mental clarity propitious to developing performances. This therapeutic function was taken to extremes (not without a hint of irony) in another direct precedent of the Milan show: *Soul Operation Room*, carried out at the Kunstmuseum der Stadt Bonn in 2000. For this piece, the exhibition rooms were turned into a sort of new age clinic where viewers, after getting undressed and donning white coats, could test their abilities in levitation, telepathy, and other extra-sensory activities through instruments such as the *Reprogramming Levitation Module* (a bathtub full of chamomile flowers where people soak for three hours, exposing themselves to the effects of a quartz crystal), or the *Rejuvenator of the Astral Balance* (a deck where the audience members could sit with their eyes closed for 45 minutes in front of a metronome). Viewers were invited to undergo the rituals according to precise and detailed instructions while remaining in the physical and mental state proposed by the artist for a set length of time.

In *The Abramović Method* the emphasis on time seems further reinforced by the structure of the piece – including the written contract and the audience's promise to remain motionless and silent within the 'objects' until called on to change positions. The artist offers duration and retreat in the here and now as an antidote to the incessant projection into the past and the future that is seen to dominate our minds in daily life. By depriving us of our technological extensions, watches, and external stimuli, the artist tries to force us – literally – to live in the present, emptying our minds to reach an almost meditative state. The trade-off is clear: 'If you give me your time, I'll give you experience. If you don't give me time,

there is no experience', as Abramović says at the end of the video. The 'method' thus appears as a sort of initiation into experiential journeying.

Fig. 4 *Marina Abramović, The Abramovic Method, Chair for human use, PAC Padiglione d'Arte Contemporanea, Milan 2012*
©Marina Abramović by SIAE 2012, courtesy Marina Abramović, photo: Laura Ferrari.

In relation to the Milan show, the artist somewhat naively states:

> [w]hen we go home after seeing a great movie, or a theatre piece, or when we read a book about someone else's experience, we come home and we think about these things: but we don't actually change. Someone else's experience never changes you. You're always the same.[8]

For Abramović, translated or mediated experience seems to have no transformative potential. The public should instead have direct, first-hand physical and mental experiences. This is the reasoning behind the creation of the *Transitory Objects*, the *Energy Clothes*, and, finally, the 'method'. The objects, pieces of furniture, and environments become experiential catalysts, platforms for the individual and usually lengthy experiences that the public is invited to undertake.

Abramović has often declared her intention to guide the public in overcoming the passivity and voyeurism that she sees as characterising spectatorship – to turn audience members into performers and put them at the centre of the artistic experience.[9] In the Milan event, the duality between spectators and participants is

emphasised by the presence of the telescopes – a sort of scopic prosthesis reserved for those who are not directly experiencing the 'method' and must be content with spying on participants from the balcony. Beyond the artist's intentions, however, it is useful to reflect on the meaning and the outcomes of these participatory aspirations.

Although *The Abramović Method* would seem to overcome the narcissistic presence of the artist, her control over the artwork and audience reception is actually strengthened rather than weakened. In the *Transitory Objects* and other installations, the artist appears to renounce the role of creative genius only to assume the no-less prominent role of therapist, priest, teacher, or spiritual guide. With a syncretic and unorthodox approach, Abramović draws liberally on different cultural traditions and ancient rituals in which the body is used as a vehicle for achieving awareness and entering intensified experiential states. Therapeutic metaphor and iconography pervade these projects, as well as the experience of the 'method'; this imagery emerges not only through the lab coats and the instruments, but also in the set time durations and instructions that must be followed blindly, like detailed prescriptions for undergoing healing treatment.

The public, rather than becoming performers, actually becomes students, apprentices, obedient disciples, or patients undergoing a cure. In this manner, art takes on a healing, educational, or regenerative function; it becomes a tool for accessing sensory, perceptual, and mental dimensions, for escaping the frenzied and continuous activity characteristic of contemporary societies in favour of slowly retreating into the self; for disconnecting from the ceaseless chain of social relations, mediated or not, that characterises our everyday lives and passing from extroversion to introversion. Ultimately, the *ethical* dimension prevails over the *aesthetic* one.

Might this be the function of art in contemporary times? The significance of not only the Milan exhibition but also the majority of Abramović's recent work can perhaps be determined starting from this question.

Notes

1. Celant 2001, p. 148.
2. Oma 2012.
3. *The Artist is Present* is in turn circularly connected to the *Nightsea Crossing* performance series (1980-87) created with Abramović's former partner Ulay. In *Nightsea Crossing*, the couple remained seated, motionless and silent, at opposite ends of a table for seven hours – the daily hours of operation of a museum – for several days. It is no coincidence that this series of performances is included in *The Abramović Method*, documented in one of the five video installations that are presented on the top floor of PAC.
4. Abramović quoted in Denegri 1998, p. 10.
5. Abramović 2002, p. 27.
6. Abramović quoted in Celant 2001, p. 10.

7. Abramović 2003.
8. Abramović quoted in Sileo and Viola 2012, p. 28.
9. For instance, in an interview with the critic Hans Ulrich Obrist she says, recalling Marcel Duchamp: '[T]he public has to be as creative as the artist. So we have to educate the public of the 21st century to think that this is possible. The "performance-score" opens possibilities for the public to be active and not just a voyeur of somebody else's experience.' (Obrist 1998, p. 42)

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'Non Non Non'

Visiting the exhibition with Yervant Gianikian and Angela Ricci Lucchi

Miriam De Rosa

Non-political, non-aesthetic, non-educational, non-progressive, non-cooperative, non-ethical, non-coherent: contemporary. It is after this list of negations that Hangar Bicocca in Milan decided to name *Non Non Non*, the first Italian retrospective dedicated to Yervant Gianikian and Angela Ricci Lucchi's installations. Taken from a watercolour by the artists and placed at the entrance of the exhibition space, this formula apparently collides with the engaged, historical themes featuring the works selected by curator Andrea Lissoni with Chiara Bertola, but it perfectly