

Marina Abramović

Mary Richards



Routledge Performance Practitioners

MARINA ABRAMOVIĆ

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Mary Richards lectures at Brunel University, London. She has written a number of papers on performance and is currently working on a book on durational performance.

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For my parents

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BIOGRAPHY AND CONTEXT

BEGINNINGS IN THE BALKANS

Marina Abramović has described herself as the ‘grandmother’ of performance art and, indeed, her illustrious career began in the 1960s and continues today. As an artist, a performer and an artists’ mentor, her influence has been both extensive and remarkable; her extraordinary and demanding approach to art-making resonating with her own, as well as a new, generation of artists. Over the past five decades, however, her work has undergone a number of transformations that mirror the evolution of her own existence as both an artist and as a person.

Born in Montenegro in November 1946, her childhood in the Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia, living under the leadership of the paternalistic dictator Josip Broz Tito (1892–1980), has been a significant factor in her early, as well as her more recent, performances. Both her parents rejected the Christian Orthodox religion into which they were born, even though Abramović’s great-grandfather was a patriarch of the Serbian Orthodox church. Both her parents, her father a Montenegrin and her mother a Serb, were communist partisans and, as such, took part in the National Liberation War (1941–45) supporting an army headed by Tito. They were part of a guerrilla movement that fought against Croatian fascists. Although the partisans were victorious with the aid of the Red Army, and Abramović’s father, General

Vojo Abramović, was considered a hero of the Resistance, both Abramović's parents were greatly affected by the dreadful suffering they personally witnessed during this time. Abramović drew on her parents' testimony for the making of *Balkan Baroque* (1997). Abramović's mother, Danica Abramović (née Rosić), originally a medical student, found that her terrible experiences deterred her from continuing her studies. Instead, she opted to pursue the visual arts, studying art history and becoming the Director of the Museum of Art and Revolution of Yugoslavia in Belgrade. Vojo Abramović continued to work for the Yugoslav Air Force after the end of the war. He actively encouraged Marina to embrace the physical demands of military-style exercise regimes, whereas Danica wanted her daughter to excel in the more genteel arena of French language learning. Abramović's upbringing played out against a backdrop that was coloured by the memories her parents had of the war's inhumanity. She claims that she always knew that she would be an artist. 'It was a necessity [...] the only way I could function in this world' (MacRitchie, 1996: 29).

Abramović grew up during a time of extraordinary change. Yugoslavia enjoyed an unusual position for a communist nation, in as much as its citizens were allowed relative freedom of movement and could work in the West. This uncharacteristic flexibility and openness was due to the special relationship that Yugoslavia had with the United States and the (former) Soviet Union, which was partly a result of Yugoslavia's strategic position between East and West and partly because Yugoslavia was not liberated by the Soviets or the United States and therefore did not have to align itself with either. The very fact that Abramović was able to carry out performances, like those of her *Rhythm Series* (1973–74), in public spaces without being arrested, is testament to a degree of freedom of expression rarely found elsewhere in Eastern bloc countries. However, that is not to say that all artists enjoyed complete freedom of expression. Abramović, as a woman, may have been seen as less of a threat or perhaps it may be that Abramović was less of a target because her mother was an art historian as well a museum director. Indeed, Abramović had the privilege of attending every Venice Biennial since she was 12 years old. Abramović may not have had much access to live performance in Western Europe and the United States during the 1960s and early 1970s, but she could move between Yugoslavia and Western Europe with comparative ease and by the time she was 24 she was able to leave the country to travel to events such as

the Edinburgh Festival. However, before this time most of her information and understanding of performance events outside Yugoslavia was gleaned from photocopied images, a few pirated videos and the word-of-mouth accounts of people who had seen or professed to have seen the original event. These fragmented pieces of documentation served to increase the sense of mystique that came to surround many of the Western performance events of this time.

Both Danica and Vojo Abramović originally believed in the ideals of a socialist Yugoslavia because they believed these were the only means of creating a classless society. The young Marina and her brother Velimir, like other children of this period, wore the red scarf of Tito's young pioneers for state-organized public performances on official holidays like May Day; often large-scale, highly visible demonstrations of unity and hope. In practice, however, the socialist ideals espoused by the state had their limits and Abramović and other young people and artists around her growing up under socialism, were often more concerned with these limitations than the possibilities of the regime.

As a young teenager, Abramović first gained a sense of the rising tide of change when an artist friend of her father, employed to give Abramović art classes, gave her a lesson she would never forget. This **Art Informel** artist, who had studied in Paris, placed a canvas on the floor and covered it in glue, pigment and sand. Gasoline was added so that he could then set the whole thing on fire. Abramović reports him as saying 'This is sunset' and then leaving (Kaplan, 1999: 17). This experience became important to Abramović because, for her, it demonstrated that the process of art-making was more important than the product; an idea that can be traced to **Yves Klein's** privileging of process over product.

Her teenage years were marked by the need to define herself and her own space. This is exemplified in her decision to collect dozens of tins of brown shoe polish with the idea of transforming her bedroom. She smeared her entire room, including the windows, with the dirt-brown contents so that her mother would not want to enter the space and would leave her in peace (Warr, 1995: 12). At 16, inspired by the planes of the Yugoslavian army flying across the sky, she embarrassed her father by asking to borrow 15 aircraft from a military base where he worked, in order to create sky paintings with the dissipating clouds of their exhaust (McEvilly in Abramović *et al.*, 1998: 15). Again, this concept for a cloud piece appears to be related to the idea of transitory, process-emphasized art production.

During the early part of her career she was trained, as all young artists were, in the International Modernist style condoned by the state and consequently prevalent at the time. But the young Abramović was fascinated by the urgency and intensity of life-threatening situations and, in an effort to find compelling subject matter for her work, sought out the scenes of accidents that could correspond to her desire to convey strong emotion. Experiments in sound followed as Abramović explored the effect that the manipulation of words and/or sound could have on an audience. One early piece was installed in a hotel foyer in Belgrade. An official-sounding voice announced that passengers for a flight departing to places in the Far East, should make their way to gate 343. Simultaneously, amplified bird-song was played in the trees surrounding the hotel. Travel from Yugoslavia to such exotic destinations was difficult at this time so these instructions were an ironic comment on the restrictions. In reality, the airport had only four gates, nothing close to the number Abramović referred to, further emphasizing the limited movement available to Yugoslav citizens. However, it should also be noted that, in contrast to artists in Warsaw Pact countries, from the early 1960s Yugoslavian artists were permitted to travel unsupervised, for the purposes of education or to participate in art events and conferences (Becker in Irwin, 2006: 391).

REVOLUTIONARY FERVOUR

This explosion was provoked by groups in revolt against modern technical and consumer society, whether it be the communism of the East or the capitalism of the West. They are groups, moreover, which have no idea what they would replace it with, but who delight in negation, destruction, violence, anarchy and who brandish the black flag.

(Général Charles de Gaulle, television interview
by Michel Droit, 7 June 1968)

The year **1968** is singled out in Europe and the United States as a year of unprecedented large-scale uprisings and public expressions of dissatisfaction. This was a response to what were understood to be the overarching powers of capitalist economics, the war in Vietnam and a pervasive liberalism that was felt, by students particularly, to arrest the ability to take up radical ideas and alternatives in society. A great many artists in the West found themselves caught up in the impact and subsequent shock waves of what had seemed, particularly for young

people, to be something verging on the edge of a socio-cultural revolution that crossed national borders and continents. Abramović, too, was involved in Yugoslavian student demonstrations and what she called 'political disappointments', something she notes in her *Biography* (1992–93, 1995, 1998) performances (Abramović, 1994: 12). However, as Bojana Pejić notes, within the context of art, this sense of and desire for socio-cultural change and re-making was, as with some artists in the West, a rejection of modernism's conception of art and of the perception of the artist as merely a maker of art objects. Pejić points out that the artist of the 1968 generation in Yugoslavia understood her/himself:

Either as a 'martyr' who suffers because of the political system; or as an a-social genius acquainted with the mysteries of 'creation', or again as a bohemian 'in revolt' (and usually drunk).

(Pejić in Meschede, 1993: 33)

Abramović, as a part of this generation, not only reflects this revolutionary attitude in her approach to art-making but she was also a leading member of the student struggle to achieve certain freedoms under the regime. This was not a rejection of socialism but a desire to gain certain provisions exemplified in the requests made to Tito that came to be known as the Thirteen Freedoms. The requested provisions included such things as a multi-party system, better food and freedom of the press. Abramović, believed in the regime and in fact held the position of student leader of the Party cadre in Belgrade, but when the students went on strike in an attempt to achieve the Thirteen Freedoms the state reacted with anger, calling in the riot police. Only three of the Freedoms were granted; one of which was an official agreement to set up Student Cultural Centres. It was following this disappointment that Abramović burned her party membership card. Later, Abramović stated: 'all my work in Yugoslavia was very much about rebellion', and she includes in this a revolt against the family structure as well as the state and systems of art (Abramović *et al.*, 1998: 16).

A Student Cultural Centre (SKC) was established in Belgrade in 1971 after the student protests of 1968. One of the most famous of the protests in Eastern Europe was the *Red Peristil* (1968); an action in which the entire square inside the Diocletian Palace, Split was painted red by four authors: Pave Dulčić, Slaven Sumić, Radovan Kogelj and Dena Dokić. The action was a protest against totalitarianism (Irwin, 2006: 39). The setting up of the

SKC (Figure 1.1) was an attempt to diffuse some of the growing sense of frustration among young people with the authoritarianism and failures of the socialist system. Fractures between various ethnic groups were also emerging and the centre provided an experimental site where students could express some of their concerns in a non-mainstream venue. Marina Abramović was one of a loosely connected group of artists asked to contribute to the centre's programme. Zoran Popović, another member of this informal group, later described the situation in 1989 in an interview with Ješa Denegri: 'as a generation emerging on the art scene, we found ourselves between two ostensibly opposed thoughts that were both socially established' (Dimitrijević, 2004: 6). These were, that art under socialism had an obligation to benefit society while at the same time it felt it should be questioning basic artistic principles, as was happening in Western Europe and the United States. This signalled the beginning of an interest in bringing together art and politics in ways that questioned the role of artists and included a concern with blurring the distinctions between art and life. The art establishment was an obvious target for this disapprobation, in particular the Academy of Fine Arts in Belgrade.

In 1970, Abramović, still maintaining her fascination with clouds, was asked by the curator Dunja Blazevic, along with five other artists,



Figure 1.1 Student Cultural Centre, Belgrade, 1972 – group photograph.

Neša Parapović, Raša Todosijević, Zoran Popović, Gergelj Urkom and Slobodan Era Milivojević, to bring something to the gallery that inspired them to make art. These artists, who had all studied at the Academy of Fine Arts in Belgrade, were all advocates of ‘New Art Practice’, a broad term used by art critics to describe the many forms of ‘new art’ that emerged after 1968. This included conceptual art, body art, land art, video art and performance. These artists, although they never formed a distinctive group, also shared an opposition to social realist art, formalist aesthetics and the anti-intellectualism which were all components of the dominant and officially authorized style of art in Yugoslavia during this period. It was these artists that presented art ‘swaying between idealisation and alienation, criticism, irony and aggression’ (Becker in Irwin, 2006: 394).

The objects chosen, while not artworks in themselves, were displayed as the exhibition *Drangularijum* (Serbian for ‘little things’). Todosijević brought his girlfriend Marinela Koželj, who remained ‘on display’ on a chair throughout the show. Gergelj Urkom brought an old blanket because he always slept in his studio before working, while another member of the group, possibly Popović, brought the door to his studio because in coming through this door he entered a different space that allowed his creativity to emerge. Abramović chose to bring three objects, two peanuts and a black sheepskin, which she attached to the wall, naming the work *The Cloud and Its Shadow* (Abramović in Stiles, 2008: 11) This group of artists, producing ground-breaking work, challenged the perceptions of the Yugoslav public, who were completely unaccustomed to the sorts of interpretative enigma posed by works that exceeded the conventionally framed and hung image. In this respect, this time and place (the SKC) was formatively of huge importance for Abramović as artistic and political ideas were shared and discussed among these artists in a fluid, creative and spontaneous way. Furthermore, Abramović, as the only woman, likens the experience to ‘being the first woman walking on the moon’ and recalls that ‘there was a kind of purity and innocence about it’ (Abramović with Kontova, 2007, 103) inasmuch as she, like the other artists involved with the SKC, were all in a process of becoming and nothing seemed set in stone.

RISK

One of the last works she created before turning to performance was a site-specific sound installation. Abramović placed on a bridge a

three-minute looped recording of a building collapsing. The recording caused so much disruption and distress that it was removed shortly after installation. This piece reveals a fascination with the forces of destruction, and the desire to elicit a reaction from a public forced to confront her work in the course of their daily routine (i.e. in crossing the bridge). So, even as a very young artist, Abramović's desires in art-making were radical, uncompromising and process-based. She soon came to feel that 'art was a kind of question between life and death' (Abramović *et al.*, 1998, 15). She even proposed to a number of institutions a performance piece that had death as a possible outcome (i.e. *Untitled Proposal for the Galereija Doma Omladine, Belgrade, 1970*).

A childhood condition that Abramović names as hemoravia (or haemorrhagia), a condition having parallels with hemophilia, caused her to bleed for a prolonged period of time if she was cut or when a tooth came out. She spent an extended period of time in hospital but, after a year, doctors decided that the condition was not hemophilia, a diagnosis which she found disappointing (Abramović with Obrist, 2008: 15). Her early experiences, however, meant that as a young child she was fearful of blood and associated it with death and dying (Heathfield, 2004: 149–50). Abramović has stated that self-cutting, such as that used in her early work *Lips of Thomas* (a.k.a. *Thomas' Lips*) (1975) was primarily concerned with the attempt to liberate herself from her fear of blood and bleeding. However, in addition to the abreacting of personal traumas, the desire to shock her viewers was definitely, if perhaps unconsciously, part of her agenda, as she rebelled against socio-familial constraints and dictates.

This understanding of the artist as someone who should be virtually boundless and provocative may be seen as an influential factor in her development of performances that involved physical risk. Deborah Lupton draws on the ground-breaking work of Mary Douglas's *Purity and Danger* when she writes in her book *Risk* that, when activities or persons are classified as a or at risk, it is usually in order to preserve social and moral boundaries differentiating 'polluting people', who need to be retained at the periphery, from the 'area' of implied safety located at the 'centre' of society (Lupton, 1999, 49). In this early period of performance, up to 1975, Abramović seemed chiefly concerned with expressing herself through her art in ways that used 'risk' rather than what some have described as masochistic actions. Abramović may have wished at this time to strip away the protective surfaces that we use to

create comfort and to shield ourselves from physical pain, discomfort or acute awareness of our mortality. What Abramović did in these early performances was publicly challenge our understanding of what constituted an acceptable risk. In this way she intended to confront us with our physical complacency, our disembodied nature and demonstrate the ways in which pain has become a taboo region of experience in modern society. By placing herself at risk she becomes a potential source of 'pollution', situating her work at the margins of what is culturally acceptable.

However, Abramović was not alone in her desire to use risky actions. Many others were taking risks as they sought wide-reaching change; on the other side of the Iron Curtain the changing attitudes and direct actions of large numbers of young people were sending shock waves across all of Europe. It was also at this time that this region of the former Yugoslavia first started to make contact with the Western art scene. The SKC became the focal point for these exchanges and a meeting place for those artists coming from abroad. Abramović was a key player at the SKC at this time, producing her sound installations at the centre as well as performing *Rhythm 5* (1974) and *Freeing the Voice* (1975).

And yet, when Abramović was undertaking her well-known *Rhythm* series of performances, she was still living at home under her mother's rules; Marina's father left her mother when Marina was 18 years old. After carrying out her extraordinary work, she would still be expected to arrive home before her 10 o'clock curfew; a curfew which her mother imposed until Abramović was 29 years old. In spite of this restriction, Abramović did spend some time abroad with five of the artists involved in the *Drangularijum* exhibition. They had received an invitation from Richard Demarco, who was very interested in the work they were producing, but the state would not provide money for this travel. The artists raised the money for the journey themselves and came to England. In order to subsist during this period, Abramović worked for a time for the Post Office in England. However, this job did not last long as Abramović would only deliver the hand-written letters, believing that the formality of the typewritten ones could only mean bad news. During this time she also designed wallpaper for the dining room of a luxury boat, made menus for a French restaurant and packed toys in a toy factory. However, Danica Abramović, who wanted her daughter back in Yugoslavia, sent off for a job application for Marina so that she could apply for a job teaching back home.

Abramović returned to Yugoslavia and was employed to teach at the Academy of Fine Arts in nearby Novi Sad, where she remained for two years until 1975. At the same time she continued to develop her own work. However, the work she created at this time did not allow for the usual objective distance conventionally observed between the performer and audience. Instead, she demanded a more intense and emotional response from spectators who sometimes found themselves active participants in ways they could not have anticipated. Indeed, Abramović deliberately played along the edges of her own and her audience's boundaries, testing the limits of both.

Each performance – *Rhythm 10*, *Rhythm 2*, *Rhythm 4*, *Rhythm 5* and *Rhythm 0* – emerged from or was in some way linked to Abramović's previous experiments with sound. The first of the series, *Rhythm 10*, evolved after watching a performance of **Joseph Beuys** called *Celtic (Kinloch Rannoch) Scottish Symphony* in Edinburgh in 1970 and coming to the realization that there was something in Beuys' work that was not theatre or conventional art, but that had a power Abramović found compelling (Abramović *et al.*, 2007: 14). At the time Abramović made the first *Rhythm* performance – *Rhythm 10* – she had little idea of how to define what it was she was doing. The repeated and rhythmic use of knives at the core of the performance and its tertiary structure did indeed work as an exploration of sound but it was also much more than this, as will be expanded on in Chapter 3 when all five of the *Rhythm* performances will be examined.

In 1975, after the completion of the *Rhythm* series, Abramović made a number of extraordinary works that again pushed physical and psychological limits. It was in 1975 that she became more aware of what was happening on the Western performance art scene where body-based artists like **Vito Acconci**, **Gina Pane**, **Chris Burden**, **Charlesmagne Palestine** and **Yvonne Rainer** had already challenged audiences with their unconventional offerings. *Warm Cold* (1975), performed at the Fruitmarket Gallery in Edinburgh, has some parallels with Gina Pane's *The Conditioning* (1973) in which Pane lay on a metal frame with eighteen lit candles beneath her, exposing herself to intense heat. Originally, Abramović proposed that she would lie naked on a bed made of ice with electric heaters suspended above her, so that her head, chest, stomach, genitals and feet were all heated. However, the proposal was refused by the Musée d'Art Moderne in the statement: 'We don't want water in the Museum' (Abramović *et al.*, 1998: 98). Instead,

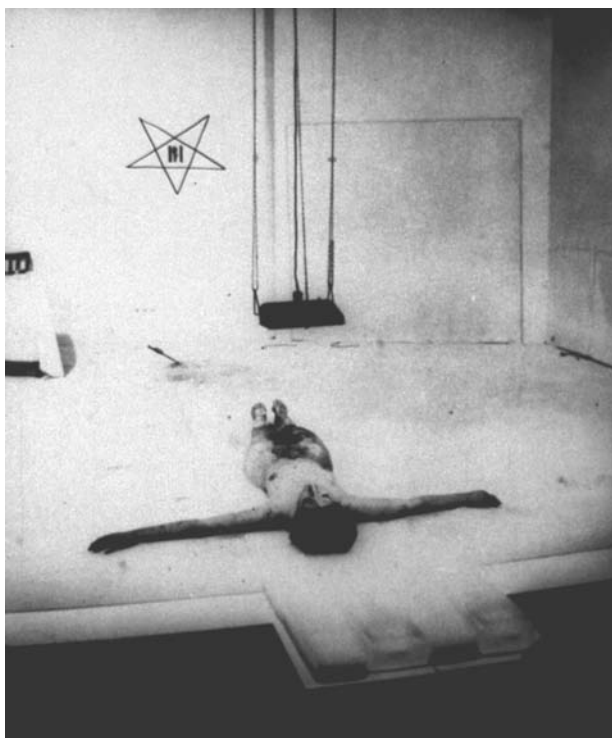


Figure 1.2 *Lips of Thomas*, 1975.

Abramović simplified the performance, retaining the ice but having it placed on a table with a pane of glass on top. Abramović did not lie on the ice, but smashed her hand down on the glass in order to break it. She then left her hand on the broken glass and ice until spectators stopped the performance. This compromise was clearly not enough to satisfy Abramović, who retained the idea of an ice bed and used it in her *Lips of Thomas* (1975) performance (Figure 1.2). This two-hour performance was a marathon of endurance for audience and performer alike.

Lips of Thomas is a performance heavy with symbolism. The title alone has elicited a number of interpretations. For instance, within Christianity, Thomas is the one disciple who requires evidence (i.e. he lacks faith) and Christ allows him to touch the raw wounds of his crucifixion so that Thomas can verify their reality. In Abramović's

performance, the audience witness the reality of her wounds. The performance moves through a number of stages. In the first Abramović sits and eats a kilo of honey, before going on to drink a litre of red wine; an over-indulgence in conventionally pleasurable substances preludes actions of self-directed violence. Wine and honey, however, can also be interpreted in terms of Christian communion as the body and blood of Christ. During the socialist era in Yugoslavia, the overt practices of the Orthodox Christian faith were repressed, as was any religious practice. The presence of honey and wine as symbolic substances, the action of self-flagellation and then Abramović's submission to the cross of ice, can all be interpreted in the light of the story of Christ's crucifixion. The crystal glass from which Abramović drank is broken by her hand before she takes a razor blade to her stomach to cut a five-pointed star. The bleeding star instantiated socialism's psychological and physical markings on the body; after all, the red star was a dominant symbol of Yugoslavian communism for decades. However, Abramović did not stop here; she took a whip and whipped herself until she could no longer feel. At this point, a cruciform ice bed, already laid out on stage, became Abramović's resting place. The heat from the radiator above her now-supine form caused the blood from her wounds to flow. It was only when audience members, worried by the extended period of time she remained on the ice, came and removed the ice from beneath her that the performance ended. This performance was first staged in Innsbruck, Austria but it also featured as one of Abramović's remakes in *Seven Easy Pieces* (2005) (Figure 1.3).

If *Lips of Thomas* was a critique of socialism's oppressions then it did not stand alone. Other Yugoslav artists also used body-based performances to challenge the status quo of both art and the socialist regime. Raša Todosijević, for example, in his *Drinking Water – Inversions, Imitations and Contrast* presented a different sort of body in pain. His performance, which lasted 35 minutes, began with Todosijević pulling a large fish from an aquarium. He then tossed the fish onto the ground in front of the audience who then watched the struggling fish gasp in the unnatural element that now surrounded it. As the fish's ability to resist its surroundings diminished, its movements became less frantic and more rhythmic. At this point Todosijević, co-ordinating his own actions with the spasms of the dying fish, began drinking glass after glass of water as the fish simultaneously 'drowned' in air. Todosijević, reaching a point beyond his physical capacity to contain the water he continued to drink,



Figure 1.3 *Lips of Thomas* (remake for *Seven Easy Pieces*, 2005).

vomited onto a white sheet he had placed on a table nearby. Under the sheet Todosijević had sprinkled a pigment that turned purple when the vomited water mixed with it. He said: 'My plan was to stop the performance as soon as the sheet became saturated with the purple dye due to the outpouring of water' (Becker in Irwin, 2006, 395). This performance, in common with Abramović's, reflected something of the sense of frustration and constriction the new generation of artists felt living under what was increasingly seen as an outmoded regime.

With the introduction of a new constitution in 1974, the Yugoslav Federation was attempting to respond to many of the economic and social changes that had occurred. The new generation greeted this constitution with considerable interest but that is not to say that artists, critics or people in general were in agreement over the way forward. It did, however:

extend the independence of the individual Republics and re-regulated their relationship to central government, converting the structure of the State from a federation to a confederation ... It further defined the common notion of socialist self-management, which guaranteed the involvement of the Party in decision making and political matters as well as in areas of industrial, agricultural and cultural management.

(Becker in Irwin, 2006, 396)

Artists, however, were still left with the unresolved issue of how to negotiate the contrasting needs and desires of the individual and the collective.

RELATIONS AND RELATIONSHIPS

A performance that, on first appearance, seems to be a departure from the sorts of painfully physical explorations Abramović engaged in is the work *Role Exchange* (1975). However, it is soon apparent that while *Role Exchange* involved no overt wounding, it enacts an erasure of the ego that is just as cutting as some of her earlier work. For *Role Exchange* Abramović swapped places with a woman (S.J.) who worked as a prostitute in Amsterdam. For four hours, Abramović occupied S.J.'s window space in the red-light district, waiting for and dealing with customers as and when they arrived. Meanwhile, S.J. went to the Galerie De Appel where Abramović had an exhibition opening, to play her part as Abramović. Abramović commented on the piece:

I was interested in the idea of the windows and the brothel spaces themselves as well as the moral aspects of the architectural space.

I was sitting there with everyone looking at me, violently crushing my ego down to zero.

(Novakov, 2003, 32)

The idea of subsuming the ego continues to be an important aspect of Abramović's performance practice. In some ways it mirrors the shamanic concerns of certain types of yogic practice outlined in a Sanskrit text the *Pasupata Sutra*; the principal text of the Siva Pasupata sect attributed to Lakulisa, a mysterious person described as a Brahmin (McEvilley, 2002, 225). The intention of this practice is that the practitioner should carry out inappropriate and potentially destructive behaviours that damage their self-image to such an extent that the ego is all but effaced. Through the process the individual is freed from social

constraints and thus ‘lies happy, free of all attachment’ (McEvelley, 2002, 226). In societies where such customs are practised, these shamans serve the community by becoming the legitimate focus of affliction, absorbing and removing social detritus. In the context of a performance action, selling oneself as a sexual commodity in a way that is conventionally understood as shameful and goes against one’s social and moral code, offered Abramović a profound if transitory and perhaps discomforting release; her usual status and identity as artist was put aside so that she could become not just an object of the other’s gaze, but an object that was there to service others’ sexual and sensual desires, absorbing some of the sexual excesses of the city. Abramović did not expose herself to the range of social and personal abuses more typical of the yogic practice outlined above and there are considerable limits to the parallels that can be drawn between the work and this shamanic practice, however, her attempt to partially subsume the ego through an activity that she felt to be shameful remains (Figure 1.4).

Although Abramović would have liked the performance to last longer than four hours, she could only offer S.J. half of her artist’s wages: a \$300 fee from the gallery. S.J. said that she could earn far more in her



Figure 1.4 *Role Exchange*, 1975.

window space so she would only agree to swap roles for this period of time. While Abramović presented herself as a commodity for capitalist consumption, S.J. was expected to fulfill the role of successful artist presenting new work to the public in a gallery setting; a role S.J. found awkward – although both roles were essentially about selling. During the four hours, Abramović was visited by three men. One, confused by the absence of S.J., quickly left when he found she was elsewhere, one who was drunk and incapable and one who did not want to pay the going rate (Novakov, 2003, 35). Ulay, who had only recently met Abramović, documented Abramović in this performance by taking photographs from outside the window space. He describes the experience:

I parked a small commercial car in front of the window. I'd taken position unnoticed inside the car before Marina had taken her place. I was equipped with a camera. During the event I took photographs from Marina behind the window, as well as of people passing by and of some talking to Marina ... a very few times Marina would shut the window curtains, that's what prostitutes do when having clients. What I don't know, whether or not Marina has fucked them – nobody knows ...
(email correspondence with author, 17 September 2008)

A series of *Freeing* performances followed in 1975: *Freeing the Voice*, undertaken at the SKC, Belgrade; *Freeing the Memory*, carried out in the Dacis Gallery, Tubingen; and *Freeing the Body*, performed at Künstlerhaus Bethanien, Berlin. For *Freeing the Voice*, Abramović screamed until she lost her voice, which took three hours to happen. In *Freeing the Memory*, Abramović spoke continuously about anything that came into her mind until, after an hour and a half, her mind was blank and the performance terminated. Finally, in *Freeing the Body*, Abramović, naked but for a black scarf that covered her head, moved to the beat of an African drummer until, after eight hours, she collapsed from exhaustion. All three performances worked from the basic premise of releasing through over-extension; emptying out the body and mind through exhaustive processes that had no pre-determined limit. This idea of 'emptying out' is one to which Abramović returned in the late 1980s.

It was before these performances in 1975 that Abramović met Ulay (Uwe E. Laysiepen) at an international gathering of artists in Amsterdam. It was during a television recording of Performance Art that Abramović saw a man who 'had half his head and face shaved, the other half with makeup and long hair' (Abramović *et al.*, 1998, 16). There was an instant

rapport, and when they found they shared a birthday (although Ulay is three years older) it seemed to them that they were destined to be together. Her personal and professional collaborative association with this young West German continued for the next 12 years. Moreover, meeting Ulay was an important factor in re-focusing Abramović's energies.

My earlier works were based on pain, they were very drastic. If I hadn't met Ulay, they would have destroyed my body, I was very fatalistic and more and more destructive ... And then after we started working together our art became constructive.

(McRitchie, 1996, 29)

During their time working together (1975 to 1988), Ulay and Abramović used a number of techniques to explore the creative possibilities of two highly committed individuals who felt a deep-seated connection to one another. Their initial experimentations together have become known as the *Relation* series. Abramović's earlier desire to create through over-extension, pushing to the limits of the physical and mental, continued in the couple's subsequent ventures. However, Ulay's presence seemed to temper Abramović's earlier self-destructive impulses. All these works were concerned with creating performances that had no rehearsal, no pre-determined end and included no repetitions, but did explore the myriad ways in which two people might come together. In addition, they had made the commitment to live a shared nomadic existence and took up residence in their small van. The following pieces, primarily dealing with endurance-related activity, intended to explore and, if possible, extend the possibilities for experiencing a kind of shared subjectivity. That is, Abramović and Ulay seem to be trying to achieve a level of synthesis that is not about sexual communion, but about something spiritual. The possibility of temporary synthesis might come about as a result of a sort of pain-induced ego-dissolution or what Leo Bersani calls '**psychic shattering**' (Bersani, 1986, 60) whereby their individual status might be subsumed so that the couple felt a sense of communion or unity. To some extent, Abramović had previously experimented with a form of psychic shattering in her *Role Exchange* (1971) performance where the ego is deliberately 'crushed'. This sort of loss of subjectivity or embrace of **Thanatos** is sometimes connected with sexual orgasm (*petite mort*) or *jouissance* but it is clear from their continual attempts to blur their art-making and their life during this period, that Ulay and Abramović were seeking a union beyond the sexual.

Relation in Space (1976) used the naked body in frontal assaults, that is, the performers approached each other, at varying speeds and allowed a collision to take place. This was repeated for an unspecified period of time until the performers chose not to continue. Two variations of this were *Interruption in Space* (1977) where the performers, in a space divided into two by a wall, walked and ran repeatedly into the wall from opposite sides of the space, and *Expansion in Space* (1977) in which each performer, back to back in the centre of the space, ran outwards at one of two mobile (but weighty) columns, so that the force of their bodies hitting the columns gradually moves each column fractionally. *Relation in Time* (1977) involved sitting motionless, back to back, with their hair plaited together so that their heads were joined about 25cm apart. In this piece there is a literal unity that they attempt to maintain in spite of the inevitable unraveling of their hair that gradually occurs over a period of 17 hours, (the first 16 of which occur without an audience). The prolonged stillness and upright positioning required to carry out the performance is clearly difficult to achieve and occurs as a result of their joint attempt to subjugate themselves, subsuming their separate selves to maintain a singularity symbolized by their connected hair. This would have been difficult without a shared fantasy of their connectedness to sustain them. The couple have effectively become an object, unable to function independently away from this form, without destroying that object. Both performers must have been acutely aware that this transitory state could have been disrupted at any point should either have begun to act according to their individual will.

At first glance, *Relation in Movement* (1977) would seem to be a departure from the other works produced at this time. In this instance the two artists used their small Citroën van (which was also their mobile home at the time) to drive in circles for 16 hours outside the Musée d'Art Moderne de la Ville de Paris during the 10th Paris Biennial. Ulay drove while Abramović used a megaphone to call out the number of circuits completed. The numerous repetitions marked the courtyard space with a large black circle (a result of oil leaking from the engine) and, for those watching the continuous motion, that same circle was etched into the mind. This exploratory performance was just another aspect of their decision to experiment through art-making with their relationship to each other and to the world around them. Their decision to live nomadically 'in motion' was literalized in this performance.

Abramović and Ulay seemed happy to work within the conventional constructs of patriarchally defined notions of man and woman; that is,

the focus of their work was not to question these constructions. This was largely because of their shared understanding of the male and female as mutually interdependent. Abramović has often expressed her view that, within the context of socialist Yugoslavia, there was far less gender inequality than in the West and that, as a consequence, she was not particularly concerning herself with 'women's' issues in performance. This may be seen to contrast with the concerns of many Western feminist artists of the 1970s who used their art to question the legitimacy of gender-based power structures and, in addition, disputed a number of issues in relation to art historical discourse: woman as the object of the male gaze, the trivialization and/or exclusion of women artists' work. *Talking About Similarity* (1976) and *Rest/Energy* (1980) are both interesting pieces to consider in the light of male/female relations.

In a personal correspondence with art historian Kathy O'Dell, Ulay revealed that *Talking About Similarity* was inspired by the actions of members of the **Baader-Meinhof** gang who were imprisoned in 1972 for their extreme political actions. This group symbolized their resistance to imprisonment by sewing their own lips together and it is this image that Ulay draws on in this work (O'Dell, 1998, 86). He pierced his lower and upper lips once with a needle and thread and then tied a knot. Abramović, seated nearby, watched without intervening and then asked for questions to be directed towards Ulay. These questions were then answered by Abramović who apparently had extended her psychic connection to Ulay to a point where she attempted to answer as he would. The resulting question–answer session was brief and was terminated as soon as Abramović felt the truth of her responses diminish.

The couple were trying to project a fused sense of identity in which Abramović spoke for Ulay, his present condition preventing autonomous speech. Ulay, as the self-styled masochist, appeared dependent on Abramović to communicate verbally with the expectant audience. However, although Abramović was free from the physical pain and discomfort that Ulay was presumed to be experiencing in his mute state, Abramović herself was equally compromised by her attempt to subordinate her own subjectivity in favour of Ulay's. That is, Ulay not only placed himself at the centre of attention with his needlework, but the whole of Abramović's concentration was devoted to subordinating information regarding herself in order to sensitize herself to Ulay's (possible) thoughts and desires and giving voice to his concerns. Whether Abramović's answers truly reflected what Ulay may have wished to

communicate is not as important as Abramović's hypothetical self-annihilation. In this way, a complex dynamic is set in motion whereby the masochistic action of Ulay was dependent on, and coterminous with, the simultaneous loss of subject status of Abramović. Moreover, although Ulay forfeited free linguistic expression and, symbolically, the Law of the Father, perhaps it was Abramović who made the greater sacrifice, only existing in the performance space as a projective screen for Ulay. This becomes significant when considered in relation to their gendered identity; Ulay, as a man, could masochistically 'voice' his protest through Abramović, and thus experiment with power-countering dynamics of masochism, but he did so, in this instance, at the cost of another person's (Abramović) subject status.

Another work that also seemed to engage with a sort of self-annihilation was *Breathing In/Breathing Out*, performed in the SKC, Belgrade in April 1977 and then again at the Stedelijk Museum, Amsterdam in 1978. The two performers, with their noses blocked with cigarette filters, shared a single breath for as long as they could. With mouths locked together they breathed only the exhaled air of the other, sustaining this mouth-to-mouth contact for as long as they were able. The first performance lasted 19 minutes whereas the second was sustained for 15 minutes, at which point the performers felt they would pass out if fresh air was not taken in. The fantasy enacted here was to breathe as one being, to share one of the most basic life-sustaining activities. The exhausting and hopeless endeavour allowed for only a few minutes of consummation before they were forced to stop. During this time they operated as one. The air tugging in and out of each performer's body required their complete focus and concentration. Their performance choices forced each other into an unsustainable interdependence that would become mutually suffocating. However, unlike some of their performances, where it is difficult not to interpret their actions through the lens of gendered power dynamics, it did not appear that either performer dominated. This may in fact be interpreted as a dissolution of binary based power. In terms of achieving a negation of individual subjectivity, their action in subsuming their differentiated egos through mutual masochism does allow them a sort of 'loss of self' as they become a single object/subject. However, this is achieved only for the duration of a single breath, thus demonstrating that equitable masochism of this kind is largely unsustainable.

Although the majority of Ulay and Abramović's works at this time were of a deeply personal nature that largely eschewed politics, they

were not oblivious to their positioning as citizens of two very different ideological systems. While *Talking about Similarity* (1976) could be considered obliquely political, *Communist Body/Capitalist Body* (1979) was really the first of the artists' joint performances with a more overt political dimension. It was carried out in a large unfurnished space in an Amsterdam flat (Zoutkeergracht 11/118) on the evening of their shared birthday (30 November). The audience consisted of friends and acquaintances, some of whom recorded their experiences of that night three weeks later so that their impressions could be used as part of a film of the event. The unobtrusive centre-piece of this work was Ulay and Abramović's passports, which were taped together on a table a short distance from where the two performers lay in bed sleeping. Two tables were set up on either side of the room, one with objects and products sourced in Yugoslavia and the other with items from Western Germany. On the Yugoslav table the utilitarian socialistic republic was symbolized by a copy of the *Pravda* newspaper, enamel cups and dishes, toilet paper, aluminium knives and forks and Russian champagne and caviar. The second table had white damask tablecloth and napkins, porcelain dishes, crystal glasses with German champagne and caviar. Guests arrived, found their hosts asleep and after half an hour of waiting decided to open the bottle of champagne left out on the Yugoslav table. The audience entertained themselves while the performers apparently slept. Gradually, some time later, all but one guest left.

The title of the piece and the careful joining of their passports, their symbolic identities, would seem to indicate a concern with the meeting of disparity. Ulay, the German, and Abramović, the Yugoslav, are here brought together in intimacy although born and raised under supposedly conflicting regimes. Their peaceful repose enacts and symbolizes a harmony made possible by their mutual knowledge of each other as individuals, in contrast to documents like passports, symbols of national identity which may be used to stress nationalistic interests and arbitrary divisions between people. By placing products derived from Yugoslavia and Germany on separate tables, the audience were forced to make choices about which products to use; the fact that they opened the Russian champagne and not the German one revealed their allegiance. The audience did not wake the performers, most did not even try, although several people kissed the two performers goodbye when they departed. Instead, the audience retained a distance from their hosts' private bodies despite the 'public' context of being invited guests.

The reality of their private peace remained in contrast to the public division symbolized by the tables. This performance was less concerned with the limits of the physical body and more concerned with enacting a desire for borderless communion and, in this respect, it was a departure from many of their other works.

It was during the late 1970s and early 1980s that many artists, such as **Chris Burden** and **Vito Acconci**, who had made performances, returned to painting and/or the making of objects. Ulay and Abramović, however, wanted to continue with performance. For a time they experimented with space and proxemics: *The Brink* (1979), following random commands and repetitive actions, *Go ... Stop ... Back ... Stop* (1979), as well as hypnosis, *Point of Contact* (1980). They also produced *Rest/Energy* (1980) which consists of the pair facing each other with a bow and arrow between them. The bow is held by Abramović, while the blindfolded Ulay holds the string and arrow. Each performer leans backward to achieve a balance that pulls the string taut and points the arrow towards Abramović's heart. The performance is over when either one of them loses concentration or becomes too fatigued to continue. Abramović, although facing Ulay's arrow, maintains a certain power through her strong, almost defiant gaze, apparently refusing to submit. But it is Ulay who always retains the arrow and string; the one to penetrate rather than be penetrated. It is an outward demonstration of their perfect trust of each other; Ulay not wanting to become a wounder/murderer and Abramović not wishing to be a victim. However, once cast in these roles there is no flexibility, no freedom to play with what has been designated; after all, they do not change places and let Abramović point an arrow at Ulay's heart. It did, however, seem to confirm the strength of their mutual bond and commitment to risk in performance.

Seeking new inspiration, the couple withdrew from the European art scene to explore four of the world's deserts: the Sahara, the Gobi, the Thar and the Australian outback. On their return, one of a number of performances they produced was *Nightsea Crossing*. As is detailed in Chapter 3, *Nightsea Crossing* (performed in numerous locations between June 1981 and October 1987) was a durational piece in which Ulay and Abramović sat motionless at opposite ends of a table staring at each other. In effect, it was a means of pulling back from the relentless pursuits characteristic of everyday living and existence in the twentieth century. But it was also a turning point in Abramović and Ulay's

relationship, epitomized in a performance of the piece during which Ulay left the table and Abramović continued the performance on her own, gazing beyond the space where once Ulay had sat. In spite of this setback and the difficulties they were experiencing as their personal relationship deteriorated, they continued to work together until the completion of their long-term project: *The Lovers: The Great Wall Walk* (1988) (see Chapter 3).

In order to have a relationship you have to give up something. You give a part of yourself, and the other person gives a part of himself, in order to be able to melt into something. It's really about giving up. It took me a long time to regenerate and to heal.

(Abramović *et al.*, 1998, 17)

After an immensely challenging period of self-reflection and recovery, Abramović went on to work with Charles Atlas on *The Biography*, a work in continuous evolution. At the time, the project allowed Abramović to explore and exorcize her personal demons and make sense of both her upbringing and family life in Yugoslavia and her relationship with Ulay, which had come to an end; the piece was a record of her personal journey so far. It acted both as a form of therapy and a way of getting Abramović to reconnect with her creative process. Key elements of all the important events and performances of her life up to this point were present. It is a performance that she continues to return to every few years, adding new elements every time, reflecting her constant change and development as an artist. In the most recent of these performances, entitled *Biography Remix* (Avignon 2005), she had young performers replace her in certain sections. The idea of the artistic re-making of performance by artists who did not make the original work will be further discussed later in this book (see *Seven Easy Pieces*).

TRANSITION

It was at this time that Abramović began to shift the emphasis in her work from performance to installation works that required a level of participation from her audience. These works, created in the late 1980s and early 1990s, reflect a greater focus on the creation of art objects and a desire to produce something which has been primarily designed for the performer and audience to share (Warr, 1995, 12–13). This took the

form of interactions with objects – what Abramović named ‘transitory objects’, the idea being that people would come to the space and physically make contact with and explore the materials that had been in some way incorporated into forms that could be sat, stood or lain down on.

Meditation, she explained, embodies a nascent politics: by emptying the mind and arriving at a state of non-thinking, one divests the self of societal conditioning and undergoes the mental preparation necessary to renegotiate the priorities of an information-rich but spirit-poor society.

(Drobrick, 1991: 67)

The body of the artist is absent, but the viewer/participant instead occupies the vacant spaces in attempts at connection with the crystal and stone of the sculpture. It is suggested that viewers should come to her installations in a meditative state of mind. This attitude of mind purportedly will allow the audience to adopt a meditative pose and the ability to attune themselves to the subtle vibrations of the crystal, metal and natural materials that she used in these works. Abramović hoped that this would allow visitors to experience her work and their own bodies in a quietly alternative manner. When discussing the purpose of the performances working with *Transitory Objects*, Abramović hints at the broader, more esoteric aim she has had for this work, saying: ‘It’s to prepare for the new century, when the artist should not have any objects between him and the public, just a direct energy dialogue’ (Abramović *et al.*, 1998: 20). These ideas are certainly central to the performance work that Abramović has so far undertaken in the twenty-first century, particularly *The House with the Ocean View* (2002).

Abramović’s investigations into the nature of crystals and their differing energies involved her sleeping with different types of crystals and then writing notes about her experiences. She credits her work with crystals as being important in her own healing process after the split with Ulay (Abramović *et al.*, 1998: 18). Abramović’s research into crystals began in the crystal mines of Brazil in the late 1980s. For three years she travelled to numerous mines and it was during this time that she came to associate particular crystals with certain parts of the body. However, her original impulse to explore the connection of mineral and crystal energies came from her experiences on *The Great Wall Walk*, when she felt that her mind was affected by the changing material of the ground she walked on. These feelings were reinforced when, during

the evenings of her walk, the local elders told her legends about dragons. The different coloured dragons of which the elders spoke referred to the mineral energies contained in the ground – black dragons for coal, red dragons for iron, etc. The wall itself, although supposedly built as a defence, was also built according to the magnetic lines of the earth to which many animals are sensitive: ‘When you throw a snake on the ground, wherever she walks she is following the magnetic lines of the earth’s energy’ (Abramović *et al.*, 1998: 20).

Snakes are energy receptors and are receptive to the magnetism of the earth and to energy flows. Abramović has observed that the Great Wall, seen from above, looks like an enormous snake (Abramović *et al.*, 1998: 326). Snakes will move in relation to charged areas. In working with five pythons in her *Dragon Heads* (1992) performance, Abramović attempted to produce energy paths so that the snakes used in the performances would be able to pick them up and respond to them. However, this was not the first time that Abramović had worked with snakes. Even during her time with Ulay, snakes were a source of fascination to her. Indeed, a snake was once used as the object in one of their *Nightsea Crossing* performances and before this, in 1978, a snake was used in *Three*, a performance where the artists attempted to use vibrations created by blowing across the top of a bottle, and a circuit of wire to attract a snake to one or the other of them. The end of the performance was to be determined by the snake, which left after two hours.

‘CLEANING THE HOUSE’

Throughout the early 1990s, Abramović continued to work on letting go of the past and preparing herself for the future. Part of that process had her return to her homeland to interview her parents and, of all things, a rat catcher. What was revealed in these interviews became the source material for *Delusional* (1994) and later *Balkan Baroque* (1997). Like the earlier *Biography*, *Delusional* was made with the assistance of Charles Atlas. It was deliberately theatrical in its approach and in keeping with this decision was performed in a theatre in Frankfurt rather than an art space: Theater am Turm. The five sections of the piece were entitled ‘The Mother’, ‘The Rat Queen’, ‘The Father’, ‘The Rat Disco’ and ‘The Conclusion’. Each section told a story and had its own *mise en scène*. In ‘The Mother’, for example, the stage space, draped in a grey canvas, was covered in 150 black plastic rats which squeaked if they

were trodden on. An iron and ice bed, an iron stool and chair and an iron window frame were also in the space, which Abramović entered to dance frantically to Hungarian folksongs before periodically collapsing on the chair, the bed or the stool (Figure 1.5). Projected on the wall were images of Abramović's mother who told stories of her life, while at other times the on-stage Abramović told her own stories of growing up. In 'The Rat Queen', the canvas is removed to reveal dozens of real rats under what is revealed to be a glass stage. Abramović, now encased in tight plastic that restricted her movement, and a long white dress became the queen who tells the audience all about these rats as well as how to get rid of them. 'The Father' section had Abramović interacting with the rats while her on-screen father beneath the stage tells stories of his wartime experiences. The rats are alone on stage with music playing for 'The Rat Disco'. Finally, Abramović appeared naked in the under-stage space with the rats for 'The Conclusion'. Abramović moved forward through this space until she reached the front of the stage. She then pushed with her feet to open the glass front of the under-stage, the lights blacked out and the performance ended.

The performance, as will be apparent from this description, was very important in terms of the development of *Balkan Baroque* (1997)



Figure 1.5 *Delusional*, 1994.

(see Chapter 3). Both pieces use interviews with Abramović's parents, folksongs and rats; although, in *Balkan Baroque* a story is told about rats, but there are no real rats present as there are in *Delusional*. Moreover, there is a confessional feel to the performance that deals with personal stories of suffering, shame and loss; the breaking out from the under-stage space symbolic of Abramović's escape from the difficulties, pain and inequities of the past, which nonetheless remain with her. Her decision to make this piece of theatre was, like *Biography*, a departure from her usual ways of working. It demonstrates that Abramović was prepared to use theatrical means to convey her ideas and no longer entirely dismissed dramatic devices as a method. It also implies a different relationship with the ideas being explored. Abramović has, for many years, said that the body is the subject of her work and, while the use of her body is still central to the way that she expresses her ideas, this performance works through the body to express themes and ideas that have been reflected on, distilled and shaped to convey a particular narrative on stage. It is this dramatic shaping and control of the material that is different from her usual procedures. However, the work goes beyond representation because, in common with her less theatrical work, Abramović was thoroughly committed to pushing herself during every turn of the unfolding story and if blood appears it is real blood rather than theatrical blood-coloured paint.

In addition to this 'theatre' work and her continued work with crystals, Abramović has continued to work with video, making a series of three videos that can be considered part of this releasing, cleansing and ordering process. The two initial video pieces appear as preparatory exercises; they record extended processes of purging and clearing that allow Abramović to be open and receptive to the new energies she elicits from ritual objects in the third piece. In *Cleaning the Mirror I* (1995), five video monitors, one placed on top of another to form an imposing tower, present a close up view of a section of a human skeleton being washed by Abramović. In engaging with the physical remnants of the human body after death, Abramović comes face to face with her own fears and anxieties about death and dying. Her scrubbing of the skeleton requires a minute examination of every fragment of this now empty frame.

Then, in *Cleaning the Mirror II* (1995) Abramović, in a single monitor, is seen communing with the cleansed skeleton which lies with her, its bones and skull echoing Abramović's own invisible skeleton, its proximity allowing the movement of Abramović's breathing to subtly

animate the lifeless bones. These two sections of the series are derived from Buddhist exercises designed to release an individual (usually a monk) from their fear of death. The title of the series of works – *Cleaning the Mirror*, and elements of Abramović's methodology directly relate to Tibetan Buddhism's 'emptying of the mind'; 'a totally non-conceptual state of awareness' (Wallace, 1999: 183). 'Cleaning the mirror' is the name Abramović gives to the process of attempting to enter this heightened state, which notionally allows those who achieve it to subsequently 'experience a heightened sense of attentional vividness' (Wallace, 1999: 185). The final section *Cleaning the Mirror III* (1995) is the culmination of the work. Abramović spent several months carrying out research into objects that had some relationship to dying and associated rituals of death. In the course of her research, she borrowed a number of objects from the Pitt Rivers Museum, Oxford: the mummified remains of an ibis from Egypt, a pair of Australian Aboriginal feather shoes, a mandrake root from Italy, a magic medicine box from Nigeria, an ancient stone mirror and a witch in a bottle from Hove, Sussex. Each object was set apart in a blackened space while Abramović held her hands above the object. Abramović was thus exposed to the accumulated energies thought to surround these ritual objects as she attempted to tap into unseen sources of power. There was no question in this instance that the public could interact, as was encouraged with Abramović's 'transitory objects'. Abramović was alone as a conductor of potentialities, something achieved through her heightened sensitivity and concentration and that could only be witnessed through a viewing of the video. In this respect the video works are a departure from Abramović's previous emphasis on spectator interaction.

THE ONION

The truth of the matter is that the Western adult is always made up already. To get at his true identity beneath the make-up is like peeling an onion to reach its kernel without knowing that it consists entirely of its layers of skin.

(Thevoz, 1984: 122)

Early in 1995 Abramović had created and performed a video work called *The Onion* that, in its concern with the elusiveness of identity, has parallels with Henrik Ibsen's *Peer Gynt*. This work is typical of this period of her development, when she wanted to simplify the way in which she

presented her ideas. Abramović has described her working method as reductive. That is, initially she is struck by a myriad of ideas that may come to her during the course of her everyday existence; often ideas that she at first feels are outrageous. However, Abramović finds that this quality of outrage adds a compulsive element to the idea so that she may well feel it must be developed in some form (Deepwell, 1997: 2). *The Onion* is a piece in which Abramović peels and consumes an onion (Figure 1.6). The simplicity of the idea is poetic, but the action itself is painful to perform and difficult to watch. The onion itself contains many surfaces, each at once dependent on and protective of the one underneath. Arguably, these layers may be considered the many masks that make up identity. But the onion is made up of surfaces only; underneath, what is inevitably revealed, is the absence of a core. Perhaps Abramović is using the onion to represent the lack of any definite, immutable subjectivity. That is, if we peel back the cultural constructions, the multiplicity of social personas we adopt and discard as and when necessary, we are faced with an emptiness, an absence behind the image projected. The deconstruction causes tears; Abramović cries as the layers are bitten into, chewed and swallowed. In eating the peeled onion, Abramović multiplies the masochistic imputations of this activity, painfully reincorporating the destroyed surfaces back into the body, destroying the evidence that exposed her. This performance can be read as provocatively illustrating the socio-cultural construction of identity, but also reveals the socio-cultural framework that requires continuous and repetitive acts of small-scale masochism to maintain the illusion of stable subjectivity fundamental to this structure. However, fundamentally the piece remains an open text, primarily because of its simple structure and execution.

Luminosity (1997), like *The Onion* (1995), was a work that was concerned with the distillation of a single idea; in this instance light and transcendence. The image Abramović created was of herself, naked and motionless, astride a sawhorse, her arms raised some distance from her sides. The light surrounding her created the luminosity of the title and her eyes gazed distantly at a fixed point somewhere beyond her. It was an image that Abramović returned to in the opening of one of her remade biographical performances known as *Biography* (as well as *Biography Remix*), mentioned earlier in this chapter. In this instance, the same balanced form appears, raised high up from the stage space with a large snake held in each hand. This time she is not completely naked but wears a two-tier skirt. There is something of the mythical goddess about this



Figure 1.6 *The Onion*, 1995.

self-presentation; an aspect noted by a number of critics of this piece. Large black dogs occupy the space below her. They chew on great bones left on stage for them, a sound that is amplified by the microphones attached to their necks. Far above us, Abramović appears otherworldly. Indeed, talking about the particular state which Abramović enters during some performances, McEvilley describes it as being rather remote and cut-off. However, Abramović emphasizes the importance for her of the public and her awareness and sense of connection to them:

it isn't entirely enclosed, because that energy only happens if I am relating to the public; it doesn't happen if I'm alone in my studio doing something by myself. The public become like an electric field around me. And then the communication is possible because they can project on me like a mirror. I hope.

(Abramović *et al.*, 1998: 18)

CONTINUITY

Performances in which the audience do not see the beginning and end, performances specifically designed so that spectators have the impression of an uninterrupted image – of something that continues beyond the spectators' vision of it – is a concept that Abramović has been working with since her time with Ulay and performances like *Nightsea Crossing* (1981–87). Her work *The Hero* (2001) follows in this tradition. The work was created after the death of her father in 1999. Her father's death was one factor in her decision to revisit her history. The work is a video in which Abramović is seen seated on a white horse, which stands motionless in a field. Abramović holds up a white flag for as long as she is able. The material of the flag blown in the breeze is the only movement in the piece and, because the video is looped, the action appears continuous. As mentioned earlier, Abramović's father was a hero of the Second World War, where he played an active part in the Resistance. The piece is doubly poignant when placed in the context of the recent Balkan conflict. *The House with the Ocean View* (2002), made the following year, did not conform to this structure and, most unusually for Abramović, at the end of the performance she briefly spoke to the assembled audience and dedicated the work to 'the people of New York City' (Abramović *et al.*, 2004: 169). For *The House with the Ocean View*, Abramović spent 12 days in three sparsely furnished 'domestic' spaces attached in a line on one wall of a room at the Sean Kelly gallery, New York. Broadly speaking, there was a sleeping, a washing and a sitting space each separated by a sizable gap. Abramović systematically performed a series of actions on these raised platforms in a cyclic and ritual fashion. She dressed and undressed, washed, urinated, sat, stood, knelt and reclined. Three ladders with up-turned butcher's knives for rungs leant against the floor of each platform, restraining Abramović's departure from and discouraging our entry into what was clearly intended to be Abramović's space. What the performance did was to open up a space in which the spectator, with Abramović, could concentrate solely on the present moment and those with which that moment was shared. In creating the space, Abramović created a sense of community among those who came. There was no narrative to follow or even a seat to occupy. The lights did not dim and the gallery space did not suggest that you were supposed to move on through. Instead, it was about stopping. Abramović's presence alone encouraged

people to remain, to share in this temporary space in which time seemed to stretch, even if it did not entirely stop (see Chapter 3).

In addition to the work that she undertook in the United States, Abramović returned to her native Belgrade to carry out a number of works that were in many ways an extension of her *Balkan Baroque* performance/installation of 1997. She did this by invitation rather than through her own volition. As has been mentioned, Abramović first returned in order to conduct interviews for *Delusional* (1994). She returned again at the request of a Japanese company who wanted her to make a video piece in Belgrade that became *Count on Us* (2003). The third return was in order to work on the filming of *Balkan Erotic Epic* (2005), which resulted in both a multi-screen installation and a 12-minute film. Undoubtedly, these returns were very important homecomings for Abramović, forcing her to deal both with her own past and the current situation in the former Yugoslavia. The subsequent works explore both the contemporary and traditional identity of her people through songs, folklore and ritual practices as well as through Abramović's own ideas and visualizations.

In *Balkan Erotic Epic* Abramović primarily focused on the ritual and performative practices associated with fertility and sexuality unique to this region. Her earlier series, *Count on Us* (2003), however, concerned itself with articulating something of the political reality of this time, as well as commemorating a famous Yugoslavian scientist – Nikola Tesla, to whom Abramović feels connected through their shared interest in energy and its transmission. Tesla is well-known in the former Yugoslavia, both for his scientific experiments with electricity and for castrating himself in order to more fully devote himself to his work without distraction. For one part of the *Count on Us* series she uses one of Tesla's experiments as source material. In one hand Abramović holds a neon tube that is not connected to any power source. Close by there are two copper wires through which 35,000 volts of electricity are passing. Although there is no physical connection between Abramović and the neon tube, the tube lights up because there is sufficient energy passing through Abramović's body for this to happen. This action embodies the Buddhist belief that 'the proximity of a burning torch will light an as yet unlit torch' (Abramović *et al.*, 1998: 405) and parallels the concept of electrical induction important to Jerzy Grotowski (Leabhart and Chamberlain, 2008: 6) where an electrical or magnetic state can be produced in a body even without physical contact. *Tesla Urn* is another

reflection on this idea. Abramović uses her hands on the urn containing Tesla's ashes in an attempt to take up the energy contained there (Fürstenberg: 2006, 10). The resulting image is reminiscent of a soothsayer holding their hands over a crystal ball. In another section of *Count on Us* Abramović worked with a group of Yugoslav schoolchildren. In the opening, a young boy sings a traditional song of love and this is followed by a young girl singing a song about longing. Later in the piece schoolchildren dressed in black shirts and trousers form a star shape that echoes the star used in her early piece *Rhythm 0* (1974). Abramović, also dressed in black, with a skeleton attached to her body lies in the centre of the star. The children appear later in the video singing an ironic song extolling the value of the United Nations; which promised the region help during the conflicts in the 1990s, but never delivered any. Abramović, with the skeleton attached to her front, conducts the children.

The third and most challenging of Abramović's recent works in Belgrade is undoubtedly *Balkan Erotic Epic*. This filmed work was made as a result of Abramović being approached by the Destricted film company to make a film using porn stars. After her initial misgivings Abramović agreed to work on something that explored the sexual and erotic practices of her culture. It was this historical context that was to prove a very fruitful source of inspiration for the work.

Indeed, Abramović spent much time exploring the archives for manuscripts written between the fourteenth and nineteenth century that detailed some of the pagan rituals and practices of this region. She soon came to see that the open and relaxed attitude to sex that she feels characterizes her own culture is something that can be linked to a whole series of the customs and practices that openly used the sexual organs as a means to ward off evil, to protect, to strengthen as well as to fertilize for procreation. However, this did not make the project an easy one. Indeed, of the three works carried out in Belgrade, Abramović considered this the toughest. This was, in part, due to the necessity of keeping the project secret because of the fear that what they were attempting might be misconstrued and misrepresented because of the confrontational nature of the images Abramović wished to create. There was always a danger that, in dealing with sexually explicit material, their actions might be interpreted in some quarters as vulgar and/or tasteless. Indeed, it is a high-risk strategy to create work that breaks sexual taboos with its imagery. For instance, Abramović used men in national costume standing together, their penises erect and exposed through

holes in their trousers. Elsewhere in the film naked men copulate with holes in the ground. With this imagery 'you're touching this idea of muscular energy, touching the idea of the sexual energy as a cause of war, as a cause of disasters, as a cause of love' (Abramović with Carlström in Fürstenberg, 2006: 66). Later, women are pictured out in the open air massaging their naked breasts while they sing Serbian folk songs and stare up into the heavens. However, what is particularly striking is that Abramović's commentary, interspersed between each discrete section by way of explanation and contextualization, creates an almost comic effect. Dressed in black and on occasion sporting clinical glasses, Abramović, straight-faced and serious, describes various folk traditions rather as an anthropologist might. She tells how a man who is having trouble persuading his horse or bull to carry a heavy load, may touch his genitals and then the beast in question. This process, we are told, will restore the animal to full strength.

This short narrative is followed by a section of film where we see a naked man standing in an artfully lit but otherwise empty field with the rain pouring down. He gazes into the distance and masturbates with commitment. A pause and then Abramović in voice-over, tells of another custom: a series of rough, line-drawn animations illustrate what amounts to advice given to women to ensure that a husband will love her forever. The flickering drawings show a woman in a kitchen removing a small fish from a fishbowl in the centre of the table and inserting it into her vagina before going to bed. We are told that once the fish is dead she may remove it, grind up the fish and give it to her husband as powder in his coffee. The film continues in this manner, the deadly serious (tongue-in-cheek?) Abramović and a series of customs, which, at the very least, strike the viewer as quirky and unexpected.

However, none of the actions is literally derived from the manuscripts that Abramović researched. The images constructed in the film are a combination of Abramović's interpretation of the manuscript descriptions of the powers of the sexual organs, imbricated with her own creative visualizations. The inclusion of the folk songs was the result of a chance meeting with Svetlana Spajić, a researcher archiving and recording traditional Serbian folk music, who subsequently became a collaborator in the piece. In bringing together an old tradition – women exposing their genitals to the elements in order to deflect extreme weather conditions believed to have been caused by the evil eye – with her own image of women looking to the skies and singing, Abramović

created hybrid imagery that was at once erotic, rooted and traditional. None of this was easy to achieve. The women and men that Abramović used in the work were not actors and actresses but mostly locals interested in the project. Abramović, who is very used to pushing her own limits, faced a different challenge in trying to realize her vision with those unaccustomed to such forms of expression. After all, these were not students of Abramović acquainted with the idea of shedding their inhibitions and exposing themselves to numerous tests of endurance.

The end result is an attempt to encourage the viewers of the two resulting works to reconsider how our sexual selves and organs are culturally constructed and understood, perhaps broadening our understanding of their potential to connect us to other perspectives where the sexual organs may be understood to have protective, curative as well as procreative powers or may indeed open up a route to a spiritual dimension (see Chapter 2).

ORIGINS AND AUTHENTICITY

This is a question not of originality but of meaning. The meaning of the work can't flow if the originality of the work is seen as holy ... The artist's name and originality are not important. Everything is built around the idea of the ego, and this prevents the work from having a proper life. The ego is an obstacle to the real experience of art.

(Deepwell, 1997: 24)

Since the mid-1990s Abramović has become much less interested in the concept of 'originality' and the way in which the endless quest for the novel feeds into the capitalist consumer machine. The interest in recycling or re-imaging pieces from the past performance work of other artists might be considered an extension of her *Biography* performance, where Abramović re-enacted selected and condensed extracts from her own performance history. In particular, Abramović had wanted to re-stage Chris Burden's *Trans-Fixed* (1974) (Hilton, 1996/97: 4). In the light of performance art's usually transitory and ethereal presence, the interest in the re-creation of both her own and other artists' performance 'texts' suggests that it may be possible for performance art to approach the condition of drama. That is, that there is an available 'text' that can be transferred and re-performed by other artists who may use it 'as a score' (Iles, 1996: 22) In this way the performance 'text' may

itself become a tangible, commodifiable and exchangeable product, open to many. Furthermore, this would seem to pose a challenge to the usual understanding of performance art as a very specific product of a particular artist or group of artists that is inherently irreproducible. If the performance is not carried out by the piece's originator can an actor, any actor, take their place? How does this affect the meaning of the piece? And can it still be considered performance art? Abramović's supposition certainly occasions a reconsideration of both the question of the reproducibility of art works and whether the 'original' artist's 'presence' is a necessity. Abramović suggests that what is more important than originality is experience, that is, the process of the art-making as experience. In this way Abramović reiterates the influence of Yves Klein's statement 'my paintings are the ashes of my art' and confirms her belief that good art should attempt to remove itself from the notion of the ego and the limits such individualism places on artistic practice (Iles, 1996: 22).

Finally, after 12 years of planning and consultation, Abramović's desire to re-perform performance pieces of the 1970s became a reality at the Guggenheim in 2005. Abramović's stated purpose was not only to give today's audiences an opportunity to experience an evocation of earlier iconic performances but also to try to set a precedent in terms of guidelines for performers should they too wish to re-stage a performance or use the performance ideas of others. These guidelines included the following conditions:

Ask the artist for permission. Pay the artist for copyright. Perform a new interpretation of the piece. Exhibit the original material: photographs, videos, relics. Exhibit a new interpretation of the piece.

(Abramović, 2007: 11)

Each night, one of the six performances chosen was re-enacted. On the seventh night Abramović presented a new piece, seen for the first time. The first night of the series was based on Bruce Nauman's *Body Pressure* (1974). This was an interesting choice because Nauman never actually performed the work himself, the instructions he left were for others. So, unlike the performances on the next five nights, there is no documentation with which to compare performance presentations. The directions Nauman gave for the performance were exhibited as a stack of papers with the instructions written on each page encouraging the

spectator to undertake the task as and when they chose to. The primary instruction is for the performer to press as much as possible of the surface of their body against a wall, with as much pressure as possible. In Abramović's enactment the wall was a free-standing, transparent surface positioned in the centre of a circular stage which echoed the circular museum space. This see-through surface had the advantage of allowing spectators to observe the pressed form of Abramović without difficulty. Abramović continued to force her body against the glass, in a variety of different ways, for seven hours.

Vito Acconci's *Seedbed* (1972), a performance carried out at the Sonnabend Gallery, New York for six hours, twice a week, was the source of Abramović's second performance. Acconci was not visible during this performance as he was lying underneath a raised section of the gallery floor masturbating and vocalising his sexual fantasies. Acconci's stated goal was to produce semen that he would spread throughout the unseen gallery space he occupied. He used the visitors to the gallery, whose presence he heard overhead, to fuel the fantasies he used to ejaculate. In a similar fashion Abramović situated the work so that she was beneath a specially built circular rostrum at the centre of the gallery space. She kept up a constant commentary of her actions and fantasies that were audible to the audience above her through the microphone she wore. So, like Acconci, she was not visible, but her presence was distinctly heard by those who came to experience the event.

Next was **Valie Export's** *Action Pants: Genital Panic* (1969), a performance that took place in a Munich art cinema and lasted just ten minutes. There is virtually no documentation, although there was a publicity photograph advertising the event. In the picture, Export is seen wearing a leather jacket and a pair of trousers with the crotch missing. She sits on a chair and has one leg propped against a second chair. In her hands she holds a large gun. At the original performance Export announced 'What you see now is reality, and is not on screen, and everybody sees you watching this now' (Abramović *et al.*, 2007: 118). Export then walked towards the people seated in the cinema. Faced with the reality of this symbol of eroticism, many people left when Export approached them in this way.

Abramović's primary point of reference was the publicity shot, not the performance just described. Abramović wore a leather jacket and carried a gun. Rather than moving through an audience Abramović took up a pose very similar to the photographic record of Export, in which

Export is seated, staring at the viewer with her legs apart; one foot on the floor, the other raised onto a nearly chair. In a similar fashion to the Nauman piece, Abramović works with the basic premise of the performance; that is, rather than attempting to replicate all the particular elements of the original event, which was, after all, entirely dependent on the circumstances of a certain time, space and personality, Abramović distils something of the confrontation at the core of Export's work. As with all the performances in this series, the performance lasted seven hours.

Gina Pane's *The Conditioning: first action of Self-Portrait* (1973) was performed on the fourth night. Originally half an hour long, Abramović repeated the elements she was given permission to use, in a cycle until seven hours had elapsed. In Pane's performance she lay on a metal bed-like frame with 18 lit candles almost directly beneath her. Pane remained on the bed for as long as she could bear it. Pane is an artist who has been very important to Abramović so it is not surprising that Abramović chose this piece. There are echoes of some of Abramović's early endurance works here, and some parallels with her own *Lips of Thomas* (1975), which is the final re-created performance carried out before the presentation of her new work on the final night. However, before she undertook this re-enactment she presented her own version of Joseph Beuys' *How to Explain Picture to a Dead Hare* (1965). In Beuys' piece he mutely communicated his thoughts to the deaf ears of a dead hare, moving from picture to picture with the hare cradled in the crook of his arm like a baby. Beuys stated some years after the performance in 1979 that the honey and gold with which his head was covered for the performance was a way of transforming the head and, with it, thought and consciousness. This change would allow him to communicate with the hare, or rather this would symbolize the difficulty we all have in communicating meaning, in particular when it concerns art and creativity. Abramović wears similar clothes in her version and gold leaf covers her head and hair. There are also blackboards placed on easels on the stage. While Beuys had worked closely with the hare, at one point putting a thermometer in its mouth and at another scattering white powder between its legs, Abramović worked differently, taking the hare's ears in her mouth on a number of occasions during the performance.

The last of the re-enactments was Abramović's own *Lips of Thomas* (1975). Abramović's first choice had been *Rhythm 0* (1974), however the museum authorities would not allow a loaded gun, used in the

original performance, in the museum (see Chapter 3). Carrying out a work for which she had sole 'authorship', allowed Abramović the freedom to make alternations to the original with impunity. The innovations included Abramović wearing army boots and a Yugoslav army cap while holding up a white cloth attached to a stick as an impromptu flag in part of the performance. The white cloth used for this flag had been pressed against the bleeding star Abramović had cut on her stomach so that red streaks of blood stained the material. The additions make direct reference to Abramović's personal history in a way that was absent in the original, where the cut star is left to bleed, boots and cap are absent and no flag of any sort appears. The military cap and boots perhaps suggest nostalgia for the Yugoslavia of the past, her military officer father, as well as her nomadic existence as a self-imposed exile from her homeland. The white flag she holds high perhaps expressing her desire to be at peace with her own past and for the country to remain at peace after the conflict of the 1990s.

On the seventh night Abramović created a new work: *Entering the Other Side* (2005). In it she is placed at the pinnacle of a huge cone-shaped dress of Madonna blue, rather like a glamorous and beautiful fairy put at the top of a Christmas tree except that Abramović is inside the structure. The dress, which covered the entire stage and rose to the height of the first floor of the museum, sent the eye shooting upwards to Abramović's central position. With her arms outstretched and sometimes in motion she reached out and touched members of the audience with her energy and presence even though she could not physically reach any spectator. After the demands of the past six days this piece seemed something of a cathartic release; something to celebrate Abramović's achievements over the past week.

Abramović, now in her early sixties, continues to work constantly; both on her own development and legacy, and on assisting members of the former International Performance Group (IPG) – a group of artists with whom Abramović has a sustained working relationship, who either came to her as students or have been invited to join the group. Her support and nurturing of these individuals has involved her curating events all over the world, as well as setting up other opportunities to showcase the talents of these emergent art makers. Recent projects by IPG artists include a contribution to the Venice Biennale called *Erotic Body* (2007), a series of regular performances at the Artists Space in New York called *When Time Becomes Form* (2007–8) and various

showings of work in progress. In addition, there are plans for a major retrospective of Abramović's own work at the Kunstmuseum, Bonn in 2009. Her major project – to develop a centre for Performance Art – is due to open in the next few years in a large theatre that she has purchased in Hudson, a village about two hours north of Manhattan, New York. What you can be sure of is that Abramović is not about to let her mission – to train/mentor future artists and preserve/promote performance art – become lost in the turmoil and challenges of the early twenty-first century.

WRITINGS, INTERVIEWS AND INFLUENCES

In order to more fully understand the perspectives from which Abramović works, and thereby increase understanding of her performative choices, this chapter will consider a number of Abramović's fundamental concepts, approaches and concerns, as discussed in a number of key publications and interviews. In addition, there are certain texts that Abramović acknowledges as being particularly influential which will be drawn on to provide additional insight into Abramović's unique vision.

DEFINING MOMENTS AND EARLY DISCOVERIES

Difficult formative experiences are something that Abramović sees as being crucial factors in the making of an artist and she has stated that she has never met a great artist who has not had a traumatic childhood or, at least, traumatic childhood experiences. For Abramović, dysfunctional events in an individual's early life play a very important role in the future development of the artist. Undoubtedly every child experiences trauma during the numerous challenges posed by early life, the difference that Abramović seems to be identifying is in what the person makes of these experiences; the making of 'good' art can only happen if personal and particular elements can be transformed into something resonant enough to transcend the specific artist and communicate to many:

through the making of art, the public gain entry to and understanding of the basic premise or problem which the artist is addressing or highlighting.

In 1938, Abramović's grandfather, a Patriarch for the Serbian Orthodox Church, was murdered on the orders of the King of Serbia. He was poisoned because he would not agree to unification with the Catholic Orthodox church. After his death he was embalmed and later made a saint. His death is significant in as much as this story of his sacrifice, together with the strict discipline of both her parents, pervaded her personality and contributed to her sense of the contradictions at the centre of herself. Her parents, like many of their generation, rejected received ideas and hierarchies of God, kingdom and nationhood and took up the quest for the new world order that communism presented. Abramović, in her turn, rejected this new world in the search for her own. Like her parents and grandfather before her, Marina was not content merely to toe the line.

Regardless of the degree of trauma in her own early life, Abramović was surrounded by art throughout her childhood. Her first words, according to her own account, were not 'mama' or 'papa' but 'El Gleco' (her childish way of trying to say 'El Greco'). In line with this precocious utterance, she had her first art exhibition in Belgrade when she was just 12 (Obrist *et al.*, 2003: 33). This is not altogether surprising, given that her mother was a museum director and an art historian. However, she has clearly come a great distance since the time when she only liked to paint, and then only with the colours blue and green. Art, for Abramović today, is entrusted with the task of moving society to think outside its customary ways of seeing the world; art that is easy to consume and digest, is consequently undesirable.

Following her experience at an airbase when she was 16 (see Chapter 1), when she was so struck by the way that planes drew clouds across the sky that she wanted to experiment herself, she came to realize that she no longer wanted to work simply with two dimensions. Instead, she would work with objects and sound, before making a further departure to embrace performance as a medium in the early 1970s. However, Abramović's conviction that performance was the best and only way for her to make art only came after she started working with Ulay in 1975. In June 1977 she performed *Expansion in Space* with Ulay at Documenta 6, Kassel. The event started with a small number of spectators, but by the end of the 32-minute performance there were around

1,000 people present. As Abramović explains: 'That was the first time that I understood the power and the energy of the public and how, as a performer, you can take this energy, transform it, and give it back to them' (Obrist *et al.*, 2003: 39).

Ever since making this discovery, Abramović has continued to work with and develop the idea of creating an energy dialogue between performer and spectator. And while Abramović says that as an artist her 'one idea' is the human body, this would be meaningless as a concept without the additional premise of using the body in ways that precipitate or catalyse an exchange of energies.

GLOBAL PERSPECTIVE/NOMADIC OUTLOOK

Abramović's worldview has very much been influenced by her experience of other cultures and societies. She maintains a fresh interest in learning about and experiencing other ways of living and being. This openness has allowed her to explore the limits of her own understanding of herself and others. Not only has she personally explored a range of bodily practices, primarily associated with esotericism and religion, she has also sought to bring a number of the principles of these practices to the public through her work, so that they too may be transformed by the experience. Abramović continues to be fascinated by the energizing qualities of people, objects and actions, particularly in relation to the use of repetition, duration and ritual processes. Her explorations of energy generation and exchange as it relates to performance is a thread that continues to run through all her work and will be further explored in this chapter.

The physical risk that characterized much of her early work has been transformed into the sorts of risk that push at different limits; the risk of refusing the comfort of routine and habit and constantly avoiding these safe but deadening repetitions, the risk of working with ideas that she might previously have avoided or seen as shaming or shameful. These are risks to the ego that in many respects are far more dangerous than the flesh cuts and wounds included in some of her past works. For, as Abramović herself has said, she became a very good cutter, so much so that it was no longer a challenge to do it (Heathfield, 2004: 149). Abramović continues to stress the importance of giving yourself up to situations so that you have an opportunity to be open to what is out there. Indeed, she is critical of some young artists who seem to her to be

primarily concerned with the art market and urban existence. Abramović believes that there is much more to be gained by turning away from these things, just as she did when she spent time with Australian Aboriginals and with Tibetan monks. These formative experiences affected her deeply, changing her and her outlook on art-making.

CONDITIONS FOR CREATIVITY

We always have to surprise ourselves, always have to have the sense of risk, otherwise you are always repeating the same thing! And that is not the point.

(Abramović with Kontova, 2007: 106)

Maintaining an openness to ideas remains key to Abramović's philosophy, as inspiration is likely to come as a surprise to the mind and body that is focused and prepared to 'risk' the danger of experiencing something previously unknown. Abramović describes it:

When I am sitting in my studio, waiting for the opening of the 'other' system of thinking, preparing myself to get an idea, I'm changing without enterprising ... And after a while, the idea manifests itself in front of me like a three-dimensional image, a hologram, it structures empty space into a colored image. That state of mind, I would like to maintain it.

(Abramović, 1998: 409)

It is only once Abramović has physically experienced an idea that she can determine whether the idea was in fact 'good' or 'bad'. However, once she has experienced a 'good' idea it becomes a persistent presence in her consciousness and will not allow her to ignore it until it has been realized. This process represents a deeply intuitive understanding of her own creativity. The physical signs of her body, particularly sensations in the stomach, remain central to Abramović's approach to performance making. Her insistence that the idea, when it occurs, remain 'undamaged' once it comes, gives the idea itself a certain sanctity; it should remain pure and unchanged by any ego-driven desire to 'improve' it. This subtly transforms the role of the artist into a receiver and transmitter of ideas. McEvelley underscores this when he compares Abramović's role as an artist with that of the alchemist: 'Medieval European alchemists, for example, would sometimes describe themselves as the midwives of nature, not creating anything, but assisting nature in her self-realization. The self-realization of nature is the goal or inner meaning of art' (McEvelley, 1999: 193).

EAST WEST

The cross-cultural nature of Abramović's explorations draws on many traditions. Her attempts to understand different approaches to extending the body beyond its quotidian use, has led to her travelling all over the world. In Sri Lanka, for instance, she spent time with people who purportedly use their psychic powers to extend the limits of their bodies; a film about Sri Lankan fire-walkers was one of the results of this encounter. It formed the bottom section or foot of a tri-part installation that was part of her *Expiring Body* exhibition in 1998–99. It should be noted, however, that fire-walking itself can be carried out by any individual who moves at reasonable speed across a correctly laid pit of coals. Indeed, there is a perfectly rational scientific explanation to account for people being able to undertake this seemingly extraordinary task without burning themselves. The explanation concerns the conductivity of heat and the density of the material through which the heat is conducted. If you touch the metal of an oven, for example, you will burn yourself; however, if you briefly touch a cake cooking in an oven, you will not. The cake is, so to speak, like a coal you swiftly pass over. However, the sense of empowerment gained from what appears to be an impressive defiance of heat and flames undoubtedly enhances self-perception and accounts for the many traditions of fire-walking that link their activities with extra-sensory powers. The top of the installation has Marina's brother Velimir Abramović's 'Western' head talking about space, time and energy while a West African man undergoing a Voudoun ritual provided the middle section or torso. Aside from the impression that the method of making has some parallels with the Victorian parlour game 'Exquisite Corpse',¹ it is difficult not to be struck by her decision to associate head (and rational discussion) with the West/European culture, and body (with its ritual practices) with 'other' cultures. But this is a deliberate choice by Abramović, who sees the West as largely lacking the vitality and connectedness of the East and has continually advocated the importance of exploring bodily practices that transport people beyond the ordinary. This is something reinforced in another video piece

¹ Each player has a piece of paper and a pen. Each player draws a head and then folds their paper so that the head cannot be seen. The paper is then passed on to another player who draws a torso and again folds the paper so that neither the head nor the torso can be seen. The final player then draws the legs, folds the paper again and passes it on. The resulting picture is then revealed.

in the same exhibition called *Diary* (1998). This work consists entirely of the repeated actions associated with Tibetan prayer. What was remarkable to Abramović, who observed and recorded these ritualized movements, was that, in prayer, a 60-year-old Tibetan woman whom she filmed, was able to exceed the physical limits of even a very fit Westerner. The woman stood, prostrated herself, stood then prostrated herself again and again as she prayed. She continued to repeat this action for more than ten hours. Her absolute commitment to the spiritual aim associated with her prayer actions allowed her to reach well beyond what we, in the West, would consider the expected physical limits of a 60-year-old (Abramović with Kaplan, 1999: 8).

One of Abramović's earliest forays into alternative cultural experiences was her decision to live in the Australian outback with Ulay in 1980. Abramović gave a great deal of credence to the traditional practices of the Australian Aboriginals, attributing to them the power of extrasensory perception and the ability to use parts of the brain that Westerners are not accustomed to use. This was a world where ritual and ceremony were part of everyday life and it was these ritual practices that were a source of fascination for Abramović. It appeared to her that each ritual activity was meticulously remembered and accurately re-embodied. During the performance of ritual actions, the past flows up through the landscape/sacred place in which the ritual takes place. People who come to the space reanimate it and add to its narrative. Under such conditions, people have a heightened awareness of their somatic responses and they themselves may undertake a ritual action to attain a higher state of consciousness where there is a heightened sense of being connected to and part of one's surroundings and everybody and everything in it; in other words, a perception of being 'at one' with the world on a profound level.

Within Aboriginal society each member has a part of the tribal 'Songline' to sing so that the soul of the earth is kept alive. Through singing the lines of the earth, history is re/generated, becoming part of the continuum where recollection and imagination blur the distinctions between past and present. Indeed, ritual actions in any culture allow an embodied connection to what pilgrims/participants believe to be the actions of ancestors or people of the past. As anthropologist Michael Jackson has written: 'to recognize the embodiedness of our being-in-the-world is to discover a common ground where self and other are one' (Jackson, 1989: 135); a condition that has parallels with the sense of integrity typical of an altered state of consciousness.

Traditionally, Aboriginal rituals have taken place in the same place, in the same way for countless millennia. And, just as has been described above, the repetition links the people to their ancestors and the Dreamtime, but this is done in a way that makes their actions absolutely about the present moment. For example, Abramović has described a member of the community known as the 'snakeman', who is compelled to continue to search for a lost boomerang. He does this as part of his obligation to keep the Dreamtime narrative alive and relevant. He searches for the boomerang in pretty much the same way that his predecessors and ancestors have been doing for the past 50,000 years. The search continues today just as intently because, as far as he is concerned, there is no distinction between the worlds of the past and the present. The event with the boomerang has just happened, continues to happen and is important to the present (Abramović *et al.*, 1998: 41).

THE DESERT AS SOURCE

The reason Abramović and Ulay chose the desert was because 'there was a minimum of information, an extremely violent environment, heat and so on' (Abramović with Kaplan, 1999: 12). It presented a challenging environment that would make extraordinary demands on their physical and mental resources. They would have each other, but little else. In this way the desert provided a place to test their limits and explore who they were as artists and as individuals. They also looked to the Aboriginal people and culture because, like the two performers at this time, the Aborigines led a nomadic existence. Abramović, in particular, was impressed by the immateriality of their culture. While beautiful objects were made for particular rituals they were not preserved but just left behind after they had served their purpose. This disinterestedness in preserving cultural objects was undoubtedly hugely refreshing to the artists, coming as they did from an art world context where the making and selling of objects was a core part of the gallery system. To make something intricate and beautiful for ritual purposes only and then discard it once the ritual was complete must have struck the couple as revolutionary. Indeed, unlike many of their performance-making contemporaries who returned to object making in the 1980s, Ulay and Abramović continued to avoid making products or objects that could be circulated and exchanged along conventional commercial lines.

While spending the best part of a year in the Australian desert, they met a high-ranking shaman (Watuma Tarruru Tjungarrayi), who eventually

came with Ulay and Abramović to Amsterdam to carry out a performance with a Tibetan monk (Ngawang Soepa Lueyar). The performance was called *Conjunctions* (April 1983) and it was a variation on the *Nightsea Crossing* (1981–87) performances which the couple had been undertaking since June 1981. As far as Abramović knew, this was the first time a Tibetan lama and an Australian aboriginal had met. Three years after the aboriginal man returned to his home in the Australian desert, the writer Bruce Chatwin came to the desert. Chatwin, who was researching Dreamings for his book *The Songlines* (1987), heard the man recount his Dreamtime story. The story was later included in the published book (Chatwin, 1987: 173–74). However, what Chatwin did not know, was that the story was referring to the man's experience with Ulay and Abramović. The man's Dreamtime account had been subtly altered; the experiences that evolved out of being involved in the *Conjunctions* performance had become integrated into his Dreamtime narrative in a way that balanced the strict requirements of the ancestral past with elements of the man's own experience of the world.

For Abramović, the desert recharged and focused her energies so that when she and Ulay returned to the world they had temporarily left behind, their performance work reflected this new perspective. The work was more pared down but increasingly purposeful as it dealt in even more depth with mental and physical challenges that required complete commitment. For 16 days the pair sat at opposite ends of a table just looking at each other. No food was consumed; no words were spoken. They allowed themselves only fluids throughout this period. It was during this performance experiment that Abramović experienced an epiphany that was to continue to influence the way she has worked ever afterwards:

I was looking at Ulay directly in front of my eyes and he completely disappeared – there was a shell of light and absolutely no body. I was so shocked by this image that I thought: 'because we haven't eaten and slept, I can't see properly anymore.' I tried to blink because I had also been preventing myself from blinking for a long time. I blinked to see if the image would change, but it did not change. For a long period of time, he absolutely didn't exist except in the form of a light-shell ...

(Abramović *et al.*, 1998: 402)

What Abramović describes here is understood by some Tibetan monks to be an experience of higher consciousness, where the reality that we are accustomed to experiencing as the norm, melts away and reveals a 'deeper reality'. This opening of the self to a 'deeper reality' can be related to Dzogchen teachings. Within Dzogchen, the practice of Dark

Retreat is of key importance. Dark Retreat, as the name suggests, is a period spent in total darkness, which may vary from days to years. One of the teachings, known as the Yang-thig, is of particular interest here. The Yang-thig teachings are:

concerned with the 'external' manifestations of 'internal' processes, 'internal' energy, and involve complex and challenging visualisations that can only normally be achieved after the extensive and intensive practise of meditation. The pinnacle of achievement is to achieve 'the body of light, a non-dual existence perfectly integrated into the presencing of the elemental lighting.'

(Levin, 1988: 475)

While Abramović's experience does not achieve the completeness of Levin's description – she observes rather than achieves a 'body of light', the monks in Dharmasala to whom Abramović recounted her experience were clearly surprised that she had achieved this vision without the sustained practice normally required. After all, such a revelation is usually only attained after years of intensive meditative practice, like that described by Levin. The fact that Abramović found her way to a condition that has parallels with a 'body of light' visualization, and that she achieved this through her own intuitive practice, reinforced her desire to explore and exploit the latent possibilities of the body. It also confirmed her belief in the necessity of direct experiential engagement, or what Abramović terms 'liquid knowledge', to gain insight. This contrasts with the conventional Western perspective that focuses 'merely on intellectual insight'. Instead, Abramović looks to Buddhist philosophy, which 'is based on a direct mystical apprehension of reality that can only be achieved through years of both hard thought and asceticism' (McEvelley, 2002: 177).

The practice of certain forms of asceticism, or self-restraint and self-discipline, is common to many major religions and is also prevalent in the practice of shamanism (Lardner Carmody, 1996: 277–78; Maréchal, 2004: 163; Andrae, 1987: 50–52; Blacker, 2004: 85–103). It is discussed here because as an approach it parallels some of the methods Abramović has adopted in order to explore the limits of the body. By overcoming the demands posed by abstention, restriction and/or severe physical challenges, the shaman or religious adherent experiences enhanced self-esteem and a sense of achievement. In conquering personal fears, desires and conflicts the individual obtains a far greater degree of concentration and self-knowledge. The nature of ascetic practices varies widely throughout the world. In some cultures such practices

are virtually unheard of, whereas in some parts of India and Japan extreme forms of asceticism are practised, even to the point where the life of the devotee is threatened. The three most prevalent forms of practice concern: control over the consumption of food; the endurance of extremes of cold and heat – what the anthropologist Mircea Eliade calls ‘mastery over fire’ (1988: 5); and extended solitude, often in darkness (Blacker, 1999: 98–99).

The restriction of food may vary from an avoidance of particular foods to a complete fast. Abramović herself, often fasts for some time before and throughout durational performances because of the ways it alters her basic physiology and energy levels. The practice of enduring extremely low temperatures may mean exposing oneself to arctic or at least freezing conditions. For instance, one Japanese practice asks the ascetic: ‘To stand under a waterfall, preferably between the hours of two and three in the morning and preferably during the period of the great cold in midwinter’ (Blacker, 1999: 91).

Both the endurance of extreme cold and heat constitute practices aiming to achieve ‘mastery over fire’. Such mastery might take the form of successfully ‘swallowing’ or walking across hot coals (referred to earlier) or even touching red-hot iron (Eliade, 1988: 316). Within Japanese ascetic practice, ‘mastery over fire’ includes fire-walking but can extend to drenching oneself in boiling water (Blacker, 1999: 235).

The third practice involves a withdrawal from interactions of any sort. This is a characteristic of asceticism in a number of different religious traditions. ‘It is by retiring into one’s own “cave of the heart” that one discovers the divine light within’ (Sundararajan and Bithika, 1997: 472). Among Christians, the practice varies from minor withdrawal in the form of retreats to much more complete isolation like that practised by monks, nuns and certain saints. In Islam, the Prophet Mohammad often retreated to a cave to meditate, while both Hindu yogis and Tibetan Buddhist monks may confine themselves to living alone in caves for years on end. By removing the quotidian distractions associated with everyday life, deep concentration is developed and a stilling of desire is achieved. Such solitude allows the individual to tune into her/his inner world and, by doing so, an opportunity for developing a particular form of self-knowledge independent of social interaction is provided. Abramović has always acknowledged the need to reflect and recharge. She regularly requires periods of withdrawal where she is able to put aside the patterns and routines of modern existence so that she can ‘hear’ herself.

In the noisy, demanding, image and media saturated Western world to choose to be completely alone is, in itself, remarkable. In solitude and silence, the mechanisms and structures that act to divorce us from boredom and self-reflection are removed, leaving us exposed and vulnerable. Under such conditions the only resource is ourselves: a dis-comforting prospect for those who cannot imagine coping with such a stimulus-free environment. The challenge then is to leave conceptions of individual ego and its distracted and distracting ‘mind’ behind in favour of selflessness.

The sense of empowerment gained through self-control and self-reflection intrinsic to these practices are clearly not ends in themselves. The combination of practices such as fasting and solitude may culminate in a further transformative experience. The ascetic may, for instance, have an experience where they feel totally surrounded by and immersed in light. Eliade refers to such experience as the ‘inner light’ that ‘suddenly burst forth after long efforts of concentration and meditation’ (1964: 420). However, it is an experience described by numerous philosophers and mystics (Levin, 1988: 343–49). This is where the idea of enlightenment comes from – the experience of a literal and metaphorical illumination. But it is also an experience of energy, which is something that will be returned to later in this chapter.



Figure 2.1 *Nude with Skeleton*, 2004.

Other individuals undergoing austerities may experience what can be interpreted as a spiritual death and rebirth. This is a common, indeed required process in the development of the shaman and is something Abramović refers to both directly, in her book *Cleaning the House* (Pijnappel, 1995: n.p.), and indirectly in some of her 'transitory object' pieces. During the death–rebirth process, the body may be interpreted as having undergone, and recovered from, dismemberment by spirits or demons. Eliade describes such a process:

The candidate's limbs are removed and disjointed with an iron hook; the bones are cleaned, the flesh scraped, the body fluids thrown away, and the eyes torn from their sockets ... His bones are then covered with new flesh, and in some cases he is also given new blood.

(1964 reprinted 1988: 36–37)

In the process of remaking, the shaman's body is strengthened and thereby the shaman's power is increased. In the context of Abramović's work, the motif of cleaning and scraping bones is one that recurs as an image both of mortality and of cleansing, remaking and acceptance. (See *Cleaning the Mirror* series later in this chapter and *Balkan Baroque* (1997) in Chapter 3.)

Nonetheless, while Abramović was reaching towards higher spiritual planes in her work, her personal life was a different story. When first working with Ulay, Abramović believed that if two parties could pool their best efforts, then the result would be better art than anything that either of them could produce individually. However, Abramović now believes that working together can only happen for a limited period of time, after which time the collaboration becomes a disaster. From the perspective of an outside eye, this may have less to do with the processes of collaboration than it has to do with the complications and emotional complexities of also being lovers during this period. When Abramović tried to explain it her terminology is revealing:

The problem in long-term collaboration is that you take your ego and the other person has to take his ego and you fuse them together in something that Ulay and I called at the time of our collaboration 'that self, like two bodies turned into one body, which is something that can work only if both collaborators do it. Once you say 'this is my work' and the other person says 'this is my work' the whole collaboration falls apart.

(Kontova, 2007: 107)

So, while technically they worked together for 12 years, Abramović admits that for the last three years their relationship was not working; they continued because they just could not bring themselves to really discuss the failure of their partnership.

‘TRANSITORY OBJECTS’ AND SPECTATOR INTERACTIVITY

The electrical current produced by crystal fracturing has been calculated by physicists as between 10,000 to 100,000 volts per square meter.

(Little, 2001: 13)

All rock can generate electrical and magnetic energy when put under pressure, crystal producing some of the most visually spectacular results (Little, 2001: 13). However, this is a piezoelectric effect rather than evidence that crystal actually releases greater power than other rocks (Cress *et al.*, 1987: 331). Nonetheless, when an extensive area of rock is put under pressure, or when other factors result in the production of electromagnetic energy, the functioning of the human brain can be altered if it comes into contact with this energy. It is this phenomenon that is held responsible for many mystical, healing and somatic experiences occurring in particular places; often sites designated as sacred. One of the extraordinary things about Abramović is her apparent ability to generate and focus her own electromagnetic field during her demanding durational performances. While it is not currently possible to provide definite evidence of what happens in the performance space, numerous accounts of audience members’ experience of her in performance strongly suggest that the space, over time, becomes charged by Abramović’s presence (Abramović *et al.*, 2004: 162; Abramović *et al.*, 2004: 152; Abramović *et al.*, 2007: 146). In addition, she has produced many art objects that aim to channel electromagnetic energy so that any person can encounter and experience this energy and the changes it produces. The production of these objects was something Abramović started experimenting with soon after Ulay had departed. In fact, the early post-Ulay phase of Abramović’s working life was characterized by the production of what she chose to call ‘transitory objects’. These objects were useable sculptures made for the spectator, which had a therapeutic dimension because of the way in which specific materials, particularly crystals, were used to increase the spectators’ energy

relationship with the objects. In spite of this, Abramović distances herself from the 'New Age' crystal healers of more recent times, perhaps because of the 'dippy hippy' image and rhetoric with which the 'New Agers' have, rightly or wrongly, become associated. It is clear from her deliberate and careful choices, however, that Abramović is convinced of the power inherent in certain materials to effect change in the energy relationship of an individual who comes into contact with them.

Abramović aim, then and now, is to emphasize the importance of individual participation; that is, transformation is only possible if spectators become active and engage with what is presented. Spectators can do this either by coming to a performance in a state of open readiness or by agreeing to work with a transitory object that has been set up for this purpose. It is no longer sufficient for the performer alone to go through a process because this excludes the spectator. Instead, Abramović wanted to use objects to 'trigger' peoples' own experience. '[T]he public can enter certain states of mind helped by the material itself ... The materials already have a certain energy' (Abramović with Kaplan, 1999: 9). To this end, many of the works made between 1990 and 1998 were largely designed with the spectator/participant in mind. The objects are set up like installations with the invitation to the spectator to get involved with what is on offer. According to McEvilley, the objects or sculpture-furniture that have been made to assist this process are constructed in order to reflect a principle of vipassana; a non-religious meditation technique that aims to 'see things as they really are': 'In vipassana the traditional meditation postures are sitting, standing, lying down, and walking' (Iles *et al.*, 1995: 48; see also Swearer, 1973: 438). While spectators may be encouraged to adopt one or other of these postures when they encounter the work because of the way the objects are set up, unless the participant is predisposed to want to meditate, and is familiar with meditation techniques, it is unlikely that meditation will happen unless there were further specific instructions requiring it.

Abramović sees the objects she makes as temporary – they will, after all, be altered or even destroyed through use. Her name for the works, 'transitory objects' reflects their temporality: all things will pass away – both the objects and us. But they are also transitory in the sense that, ideally, they allow the meditating participant to transition from one state of consciousness to another in a way that exceeds the mind's frequent and mostly banal shifts in state. The term is additionally reminiscent of the

psychoanalyst Donald Woods Winnicott's 'transitional objects' used by the developing child to assist in the process of separation and independence necessary for social and psychological development (Winnicott, 1971). Lots of the pieces have instructions: 'Remove your shoes', 'Close your eyes', 'Don't move'. All these statements ask the viewer to enter and engage in a particular sort of way. The instructions are not completely open-ended but are designed to push the participant to focus in predetermined sorts of ways. That is not to say that any two participants are likely to feel the same way when they come in contact with the object/sculptures, but merely that Abramović makes certain demands of those who come to the work. This process is reminiscent of the lists that Abramović's mother used to leave for her daughter; 'Eat a piece of bread', 'Learn ten phrases in French' (Abramović and Celant, 2001: 22). It is as if something of the imperative nature of her childhood is echoed in these participatory works – 'for your own good'.

Her piece *God Punishing* gives an idea of what a spectator might encounter. *God Punishing* (part of Marina Abramović Works: 1990–98 exhibition) is a piece which combines elements of a story from her childhood with a traditional Korean marital custom where the virgin to be married cuts her hair as a sacrifice. *God Punishing* is an installation consisting of three large rock crystals evenly spaced, a few feet apart, near a white wall. Beside each crystal a long hank of Korean virgin hair and copper strands hang from a short stick so that the hank ends about half a metre from the floor. In front of these objects a table is set with two glasses and two chairs. The story at the heart of these objects is that of King Solomon whose ships were destroyed at sea. The King was so angry at the loss of the ships and their occupants that he ordered his army to whip the sea 385 times. Even as a child Abramović saw this action as ridiculous; however, it was clearly also something that fascinated her enough for her to translate elements of this story into components of her piece. The crystals represent the sea in a frozen state and the hair and copper the whips. The invitation to the public is to use the whips on the crystal. Abramović notes: 'It's important that the whips are made from the hair because we are the gods, and we can only punish the sea with our own body' (Abramović with Kaplan, 1999: 9). Abramović has observed a tendency for art viewers in some cultures to happily take up the invitation and use the objects produced for them, while viewers from other cultures find it more difficult to lose their inhibitions and participate.

In general, interactive artworks, like a number of those made by Abramović, were seen in the 1990s by the critic Hans Ulrich Obrist as a response to the lack of or limited participation required of most technology-based activities like gaming, where the parameters of participation are restricted to pre-set scenarios. With the advent of YouTube, MySpace, Wii games, Facebook and Second Life, however, the nature of telematic experience is rapidly evolving to make the human–computer interaction more and more compelling. Nevertheless, Abramović continues to root many of the problems of contemporary Western society in its lack of genuine connection, both to other people and to the larger cosmos. According to Abramović, this disconnection has led people to ignore their environment and to live selfishly in ways that fail to meet the real needs of individuals or society. Everyone is too busy; caught up in the cycles of contemporary existence that reads inactivity as boredom or laziness. By contrast, Abramović is keen to advocate the importance of being free to do nothing in a society that seems to be repulsed by this idea. Abramović embraces ‘boredom’ as a necessary stage through which you must pass in order to become creative. In doing ‘nothing’ and ‘emptying the boat’ you can allow sufficient space and time for something to happen. In this respect Abramović’s ideas can be linked to particular processes associated with Taoism, which itself has many links with Buddhism. A single interpretation of Taoism is not possible as branches of Taoism grew and developed in different ways over the centuries. There are many practices associated with it, including ‘meditation, dietary guidelines, Chinese medicine, Qi Gong, martial arts, sexual practices, military strategy, astrology, outer and inner alchemy, divination, magic and talismans, ritual, Feng Shui (geomancy), sacred architecture and the arts’ (MacKenzie-Stewart, 1995: 1). As a result, most people who claim to be Taoists only concern themselves with one or two areas of Taoist practice.

Within the alchemical tradition of Taoism, breathing, meditation, movement techniques, fasting and the use of medicinal herbs are all core. This traditional practice is a synthesis of Chinese medicine and the doctrine of the *I Ching* (the Book of Changes) central to Chinese philosophy. In parallel with Abramović’s belief that the body is the means by which genuine understanding can be achieved, Taoism also stresses the importance of the body in the journey to self-realization (Ma, 2005: 237). Central to the *I Ching* are eight trigrams or *Pa Kua* which are configured in an octagon which corresponds with the points

of the compass. Each trigram is associated with particular cosmic and psychological powers and qualities. There are four yin (moon) trigrams and four yang (sun) trigrams that together represent the whole universe and the circle of existence. Trigram forces are believed to be present in the internal organs of the body, and it is through development of these energies in the organs that spirits become embodied and the individual concerned becomes more spiritualized with the ultimate aim of the body becoming 'a reflection of the entire cosmos'; such spiritualized bodies may then become 'residences of the gods' (Ma, 2005: 237). An understanding of the role of the body's physical state in achieving particular energized and spiritual states is central to Abramović's philosophy.

CAGE AND KLEIN

The *I Ching* itself has been used by other creative Westerners, in particular, the musician/composer John Cage (1912–92). Cage's ideas have had a significant impact on Abramović. He was a well-known advocate of the *I Ching* as interpreted through Ch'an or Zen; the Japanese version of Buddhism's encounter with Taoism. From the 1960s, Cage used this book as a tool in his music compositions so that decisions about each note's pitch, timbre and duration could be determined through the process of chance calculations. Through this method, composer intention (and ego) could be largely eliminated. The resulting composition reflected Cage's philosophy that *all* sound was music. Cage's impact on Abramović can be seen in a number of indirect ways and is linked to their shared interest in Eastern philosophy. Abramović deliberately orientates herself towards ideas or projects that are likely to have an unpredictable impact on her and her art-making so that each project offers the opportunity for growth. While John Cage has been an important source of inspiration, so too have the ideas of the artist Yves Klein (1928–62).

Yves Klein's belief that the final product was not as important as the process of art-making is something that has already been acknowledged as a significant influence on Abramović's conceptual framework. However, he could also be said to have affected Abramović in other ways as his image *Leap into the Void* (1960), with its purported attempt to exceed the limits of the possible, perhaps attests. Klein believed that through meditation he could endow his artworks with a spirituality that in turn would allow the viewers of the artwork to enter a higher level

of awareness. There are further intriguing points of contact between these artists, in particular between Klein's idea of 'collaboration', which according to his designation concerns the shared work artists do when they make art (Stich, 1994: 159), and Abramović's idea of a performance score to be shared with 'any' participant willing to commit to the enterprise. Klein, in a somewhat sweeping manner, presupposed that artists all shared a collective sense of identity and purpose and because of this it was possible, indeed necessary, to put one's ego aside so that the 'real' goal of art could be fruitfully pursued. The 'real' goal, in this instance, was to reach spiritual heights. He wrote:

Let everyone without exception see the supernatural that is in Art, so that faith, the new faith of Art, may enter into them all, and all men may enter a new and great worldwide civilization of the beautiful. So be it.

(Stich, 1994: 131)

For Klein, art-making as a collective enterprise meant that any artist could sign the work of others and use the possessive pronoun pronouncing any work 'my' art, because within this conception no artist was the sole creator of any work of art. However, Klein's insistence on such collectivism led him to fall out with the artist Jean Tinguely in March 1959. At the time the pair were working together on an aerial sculpture. Tinguely became so infuriated by Klein calling the invention 'my machine' that Tinguely entirely stopped working with Klein. Klein's ego-free ideals were (and are) unlikely to be adopted by artists, who understandably want their ideas to be acknowledged as their own. By comparison, Abramović advocates the shared use of performance scores (see Chapter 1) but she is adamant that the 'original' artist is acknowledged and that permission from the artist is gained before any re/performance of their work is undertaken. This approach is heavily reliant on making use of the available documentation of performances. But the act of documenting is an imperfect process and the resulting 'document' entirely partial and incomplete. It is an area of performance studies that remains the subject of considerable debate.

DOCUMENTATION

During most of the 1960s and 1970s, performance works, on the whole, were poorly documented and although very few artists forgot

completely to produce some documentation of their work, there were both practical and ideological reasons for the relative paucity of records. Recording equipment, cameras and tapes would have been relatively expensive to buy, but, in addition, many artists did not want to produce commercial art objects that would become part of the capitalist circulation of goods; a refusal to create anything permanent was a way of attempting to thwart the system and to stay loyal to performance's supposed 'irreproducibility' (see Phelan, 1993). However, as a result, we know comparatively little about what many consider to be iconic performances of this period. What does remain, aside from photographs of varying quality and a few tapes, are witness accounts. And while Abramović highlights the value and importance of the witness's record as something more powerful and perhaps 'truer' than the poor quality photographic record, these accounts are inevitably distorted by mis/remembering and/or the accumulated mythology that may have come to surround particular performances. Chris Burden's *Trans-fixed* (1974), which Abramović heard about when she was still an emerging artist living in Yugoslavia, is a case in point. According to the version of events recounted to Abramović, after Burden was crucified to the bonnet of a Volkswagen, the car was driven around the streets of Los Angeles. People even claim to have seen the car driving around like this. In fact, Burden remained on the bonnet only long enough for the car to be pushed out of the garage, for a photograph to be taken and for the car to be pushed back into the garage. Moreover, as Hans Ulrich Obrist has pointed out, performance events where the maximum number of spectators was between 50 and 60 can sometimes subsequently have literally thousands of people claiming to have been present (Abramović *et al.*, 1998: 42). This phenomenon inevitably multiplies the possibilities for misrepresentations of performance events to circulate.

Abramović offered a radical alternative in her decision to re-make performances. In the late 1990s the performances Abramović was most interested in re-making were Vito Acconci's *Seedbed* (1972), Chris Burden's *Transfixed* (1974) (which she referred to as the 'Crucifixion on the Volkswagen' piece) Dennis Oppenheim's *Tarantella*, Gina Pane *The Conditioning* (1973) (which Abramović knew as *Candlebed*) and her own *Rhythm 0* (1974). However, for various reasons these were not all included in the final incarnation of her ideas: *Seven Easy Pieces* (2005).

Fed up with having her ideas exploited by advertisers (see photographer Steven Meisel's 'cover-version' of the Ulay/Abramović

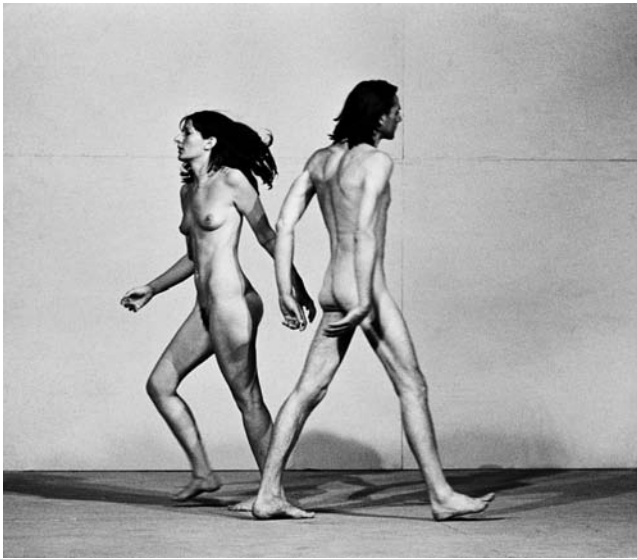


Figure 2.2 *Relation in Space*, 1976.

performance *Relation in Space* (1976) in *Vogue Italia* magazine, November 1998), keen to bring influential performances to a new public and curious to understand something more about a number of the landmark performances of the 1970s that she herself did not witness. Abramović began advocating the idea of developing performance scores that would function very much in the same way as music scores do already. While not a new idea, it clearly appealed to Abramović because it was a way of acknowledging the history of performance art. The score would provide instructions for a performance that could notionally be performed by anyone with the appropriate skills (on condition that the original artist gives permission for them to do so). While **Anna Halprin** developed and popularized **R.S.V.P. cycles**, scoring in this way is relatively underdeveloped in the arena of performance art, **Fluxus** perhaps being the most notable exception. In Abramović's view, it would be ideal if images of the first performance were displayed at any future performances, after which the performer would be free, up to a point, to do as they pleased with the score. Nonetheless, the re-presentation of others' works has its own challenges and is a more involved process than

Abramović initially suggested. This quickly became apparent to Abramović after she was approached by a man she did not know who wished to carry out her *Nightsea Crossing* performance without the table:

I said, 'it's not just me, it's Ulay. And I have to see you. I can't just give you permission over the computer. I don't know what your career is and whether you can do this.' ... It was striking that yet another artist was unwilling to research fully the original material and enter into a meaningful dialogue with the artist or artist's estate.

(Abramović *et al.*, 2007: 21)

There are clearly additional conditions that Abramović would like to see imposed; something that was not really acknowledged when she first discussed the idea in 1998 (see Abramović *et al.*, 1998, interview with Hans-Ulrich Obrist, 2008). The artist undertaking the performance must have some sort of track record in the area that can be scrutinized in order to determine their suitability to undertake the performance. The whole undertaking must be approached with considerable seriousness and must not be embarked on without thorough research and understanding. And, ideally, the original artist should be invited to the performance. There is also likely to be a fee attached for the use of another's intellectual property, thus providing performers with a source of royalties whenever an artist's piece is used, in much the same way that a playwright or composer receives monies when their work is performed.

Abramović feels that such an acknowledgement would also help to stop a trend she has noted whereby new/emergent artists perform 'new' works that are not in fact original. For instance, Abramović has voiced concern about an artist recently sleeping in the Serpentine gallery in London without being aware, or at least not acknowledging, that this had already been done by Chris Burden in the 1970s. As Abramović sees it, if artists made and kept 'scores' of their work then perhaps this tendency to present old ideas as new ones could be minimized. Whether this sort of protectivism is possible, useful or desirable remains a moot point.

Abramović refers to the pared down scores of her own works as being just the bare bones of actions. This allows for interpretation within a set frame. According to Abramović the scores are like a cookbook of recipes. The 'open structure' of a performance score allows the experience of the new performer to be mapped onto the new version.



Figure 2.3 *The Conditioning*, 2005 (remake of Gina Pane's *The Conditioning*, first action of *Self-portrait(S)*, 1973).

The situation is analogous to the conditions she sets up for her workshops: the conditions are laid down, but each person who undertakes the workshop produces something different at the end because it is their own interpretation of their experience that matters. So, while performances should be open to all, mental and or physical preparations may be necessary if you want to re-perform something that has particular mental or physical demands, for example, a duration performance that required you to remain motionless for seven hours. Even if you felt that you could physically maintain a particular posture for seven hours, you are likely to want to mentally 'rehearse' strategies for dealing with the likely physical discomfort. You may also wish to modify your usual patterns of consumption to reduce your need to expel bodily wastes.

Her initial choices for *Seven Easy Pieces* (2005) were made for purely personal reasons; these performances 'charged her' in a way that other works did not and their extreme nature was of particular importance to her, confirming her belief that art itself is there to unsettle and disorder our customary way of seeing. In 1999 she said: 'to me art has to be disturbing. It has to ask questions and have some kind of prediction of the future within it' (Abramović with Kaplan, 1999: 16). However,

there were and are dangers too in the re-performance of other people's work; the original work, after all, was a product of a particular context and time and its re-performance without due consideration of the present is likely to prove disappointing as the factors that contributed to its exalted status no longer exist. Unlike most traditional texts or scores, the work is often as much about the uniqueness of the particular surrounding circumstances, the individual artist performing and the actual one-off process of a single performance. If new audiences are to be created with the re-presentation of old ideas, then the old ideas must be made relevant to the present. One idea that retains its currency is the idea of risk.

In taking a risk in a performance work the artist gains a kind of focus that is not accessible in the ordinary course of everyday actions; such concentration can only be achieved through the heightening of circumstances which risk implies. Furthermore, it is precisely the risk involved that creates a special spectator/performer relationship. The high-risk strategies associated with performance art in the 1970s are largely responsible for the nostalgia of later performance art for the early definitive performance work of the 1960s and 1970s. Abramović herself is not immune to this nostalgia, believing that the art produced in the 1990s and beyond lacked the rigour of the 1970s. As she sees it, many artists are reluctant to extend themselves in the way that she and others did in the 1970s.

In her own practice it is the times when she is uncertain or afraid that she finds most interesting. She drives herself to embrace these 'danger' zones because, even if the experience is painful, for her the effort opens up new horizons of consciousness. Abramović abhors what she sees as some artists' overreliance on electronic technology in their work. As she sees it, such art can actually increase people's feeling of alienation; works of art should be used instead to create a greater sense of connectedness among people.

THE MIND'S POTENTIAL

Artists, says Abramović, have a capacity to access the potential of the unconscious mind in the form of visions that come to the artist as three-dimensional objects. The idea may appear at any time. Initially, in order to facilitate this process of accessing the subconscious and discovering more about her own relationship to ideas for performance, Abramović

underwent three months of hypnosis. Every day Abramović was hypnotized and whatever was revealed during the session of hypnosis was recorded. As a result of this, Abramović discovered five ideas that were of interest to her, and she subsequently went on to use these ideas in her performances. Furthermore, particular cultural traditions or spiritual practices that appear to exploit the mind's potential are also a source of inspiration. On more than one occasion Abramović has recounted her experience with Tibetan lamas, who seemed to defy conventional physical limits. On one occasion, in particular, Abramović was struck by the manner in which a group of lamas whose physiques were not remotely athletic were able to perform dance actions of enormous agility under certain conditions. According to Abramović, the only change in their outward appearance was the donning of a mask, through which the lama were 'transformed' into the creature their extraordinary actions then emulated in dance. Abramović's observations suggest that the lama entered a trance-like state, induced and developed via years of mind training and meditation, while the particular body movements used are likely to be informed by years of observing other monks perform these dances at similar events, though Abramović does not know how many times these monks have previously performed the dances.

TRANCE STATES AND EXPERIENCES OF TIME

While states of trance are difficult to define because the nature and interpretation of trance varies depending on the context in which it occurs (Boileau, 2002: 360), a number of anthropologists (Bird-David, 2004: 325–39; Boileau, 2002: 361; Hamilton, 2008: 181) and sociologists (Greenfield, 2005: 27–79) interpret the trance state as a means by which particular individuals in a society heighten their ability to tune into, guide and express feelings and experiences. These experiences are sometimes expressed in terms of making contact with sacred and/or ancestral spirits. Unless the liminal condition of trance is entered, such expression and connection is considered impossible. Trances, within a number of cultural traditions, while they either partially or completely dissolve customary states of awareness, are thus believed to allow a temporary link with the 'sacred' world. Through the experimentation with consciousness that the trance state implies, it has been suggested by anthropologist Michael Jackson that the process allows for the creation

of 'new possibilities' with regard to how a society can manage and take control over its affairs (Jackson, 1989: 28). In other words, access to and understanding of the sacred world, via the en-tranced individual allows for a creative response to the challenges which a society may encounter. In occupying the 'special state' of trance, where the customary rules are suspended, an individual may also express views and opinions that might not otherwise be spoken; thus becoming a conduit through which the 'unsayable' is said. There are also some interesting parallels between states of trance and concepts of 'sacred' time. For instance, Abramović describes Sufi practices of turning rapidly for extended periods of time as means of both entering a trance-state and also as a means of being very much 'in the moment'.

They [Sufis] play with sharp swords in a very restricted space so that any wrong move could cause the death of somebody. For them, there is not past or future, only a present that is like a trampoline from which you can make the mental jump into the other state of consciousness.

(Abramović *et al.*, 1998: 406)

The Sufi practitioner enters into a trance state through the repetitious action of turning the body in circles. This spinning accumulatively alters his state of mind. In addition, risk is instigated through the presence of swords, which each practitioner holds as they turn and as others turn with him. An element of risk is what Abramović states as being an essential part of the conditions necessary to enter into a higher state of consciousness as she understands it.

Situations of deep risk, like that of the Sufi ritual are not usually entered into deliberately during the everyday existence of people in the West. However, a state akin to this is sometimes described when a person has experienced some extraordinary encounter with danger or disaster so that things appear to happen in slow motion; people feel they are standing outside time. But it is also a state that Abramović unintentionally achieved in some of her performances of *Nightsea Crossing*, an experience that was pivotal in her development as a person and as a performance maker (see Chapter 3). It is a state she continues to seek to explore because of the way it alters the experience of time as well as the experience of reality. However, altered states of consciousness (ASC) can be achieved by many means other than placing the body under conditions of risk. Indeed, a number of models for the various types of ASC have been proposed. Within one neuropsychological

model, for example a 'stage one' ASC 'includes geometric, luminous, non-veridical visual percepts, such as undulating lines, grids, and nested curves'. During a 'stage two' ASC 'subjects begin to make sense of the geometric percepts. They may, for instance, say that iridescent undulating lines *are snakes*'. While 'stage three' ASC 'is characterized by "visions" of people, animals and monsters, as well as hallucinations in all the senses'. Stage three is 'frequently reached by seeming to pass through a vortex or tunnel, or by a sensation of flight' (Lewis-Williams, 2004: 107). Although these stages are numbered one to three they are not intended to be seen as sequential; there is blurring between states and an individual might have an experience that combined stages or moved between them in any order. The model is conceived as an interpretative tool that might be used to give some sort of distinguishing structure to experiences of ASC; however, it is clearly not exhaustive. Individual spiritual and religious traditions propose different interpretations of comparable states that reflect the values and culture of their own belief systems.

SPACE AND PLACE

While certain physical practices and/or the consumptions of certain substances may contribute to ASC, other conditions may also promote such experiences; one of these factors is place. A 'charged' performance space, like those generated by Abramović, can usefully be compared with places designated as sacred. This is not done in order to denigrate or question people's experience of sacredness or the divine in such places, but to consider the role that energy plays in people's experiential understanding of space, place and time.

In anthropological circles there are a number of different approaches to defining what constitutes a sacred place. According to the researcher Belden C. Lane, three models dominate. The respected Mircea Eliade takes an ontological approach, using his research in the field to understand how place and time are understood through mythology and tribal wisdom. In this interpretation a sacred place is quite separate from the quotidian; a place of **hierophany** with its own luminosity and power. However, this perspective does not take into account the way in which the worlds of the sacred and the profane inevitably intermingle. In other words, the transcendental experience is still rooted in the particular culture from which it emerged.

Alternatively, a cultural approach, would argue that the sacredness of a place is socially and culturally constructed and that the place has no meaning in and of itself. This perspective ties identity to place. In doing so, this approach draws attention to the way in which the cultural construction of space has led to conflict, as claims and counterclaims over 'sacred space' are made; the holy buildings constructed by different faiths in Jerusalem being an example of this, a site which Christians, Jews and Muslims all consider to be sacred. This approach avoids the possible accusations of supernatural experience because the sacredness of the space depends on how cultural factors and ideology understand the space/place. This approach does not acknowledge the significance of the place itself in the formation of sacredness.

Finally, the phenomenological approach attempts to demonstrate the inter-subjectivity of place and perception. It stresses embodied experience and the way in which both the place and the participant are mutually involved in what is felt; the place feeling the person and the person feeling the place, as it were. This perspective does not take into account the ways in which both transcendence and culture influence how a place is construed as holy. All three perspectives usually come into consideration when sacred places or experiences are discussed, usefully articulating ideas concerning the presence of the sacred, how culture inflects on the sacred and the influence of particular features of a place on people's understandings of its sacredness.

There are parallels to be drawn here between Abramović's conception of performance as an exchange of energies within a space that heightens the connection between performer and participants and her ritual approach to aspects of her performance work. In essence, something akin to a 'sacred space' is generated by the artist's actions so that the place of performance itself resonates with a multitude of energies, palpable to and reciprocated by those present. It is also clear that the presentation of such performance work in designated performance spaces demonstrates the significance of such places in determining how the work may be read and understood and thus reinforces a sense of its social and cultural construction. In common with attempts to understand sacred space, attention to a range of physical, ontological, phenomenological and cultural phenomena is required in order to do justice to both Abramović's understanding of her work, others' experience of it and the way it impacts on space.

CREATIVE CONTRADICTIONS

The importance of the artist's live presence in a work is something that Abramović continues to emphasize. She also encourages the idea of a 'confrontation' with the audience: the artwork should provoke a response. This contrasts with the work of artists who remove themselves from the challenge of live performance and live audiences, preferring the safety of their studios or of filmed/videoed production. It is clear that Abramović will endeavour to continue to perform even when the physical limits of age would seem to prevent her from doing so. In particular, Abramović, who was 60 years old in November 2006, wants to continue to undertake durational performances. This is because she feels durational performances give her time in a way that she lacks in her everyday existence: 'So, actually, I have time in my work, which I don't have in life' (Abramović with Kontova, 2007: 106).

In spite of Abramović's willingness to continue to embrace the remarkable demands of her brand of live performance, she is also very well aware of the contradictions at the centre of her existence; her desire for glamour contrasting with the rigours of her self-imposed austerity. In short, there are times when she needs the ritual and seclusion of a monastery setting, where she might disappear for months at a time; while at other times she will go to New York and indulge herself, eating 'bad things for my body' like chocolate, and watching 'bad movies' (Abramović with Kaplan, 1999: 10) Both these activities are a way for her to maintain an overall balance in her life and artistic practice: 'Now I like to analyze this openly to show others that we all have this problem. The thing is to learn from your own art because it is much farther along than you are' (Abramović with Kaplan, 1999: 10).

The initial shame she associated with her movement between such extremes, subsided when she was able to acknowledge these dual aspects of herself. Part of this process found expression in her newfound enthusiasm for the theatre, a form she once maligned. In particular, she found she enjoyed the way theatre can manipulate and control technology and imagery in ways that intensify the experience of both performer and spectator. Her decision to make *Biography* played an important role in liberating her from her shame at having apparently contradictory elements at the heart of her personality. Ideally, she would like to see *Biography*, a work about her life, staged in traditional plush theatre spaces so that the reality of her live actions is contrasted with the

expectation of a conventional theatre audience who are more used to fake blood and 'acted' emotions. *Biography* moves between moments where her actions are risky and real, and those where she seems to be sending herself up as an object of ridicule. The resulting performance is fast moving and intense as 50 years of her life are told in a mere 80 minutes. In looking back, she considers the whole process she underwent as very helpful for her development, both as a person and as an artist.

VIDEO WORKS

In more recent years Abramović has increasingly turned to video. Her use of video is not just to document her performances but enables her to use this medium to give an extra dimension to a piece when she is performing it or as a means of reproducing some of the intensity of her live performance in work or places where she is not able to be present for more than a limited period of time.

Abramović's first solo video installation was made in 1993 and was called *Becoming Visible*. It is also the first video installation in which she herself appears. Five pythons entwine her head and shoulders and a series of instructions are given to the viewer by means of a voiceover. The art historian Chrissie Iles suggests that this is Abramović's way of bringing together an image from an earlier performance *Boat Emptying/Stream Entering* and the idea of instructions to the public used in her transitory objects work, in order to increase the engagement of the viewer (Iles in Abramović *et al.*, 1998: 327).

Image of Happiness (1996) presents a strikingly different aspect of Abramović's personality. It represents a romanticized vision of old-fashioned gendered values and shows Abramović confessing the 'image of happiness' to the camera: the pregnant wife at home awaiting the return of her miner husband for whom she provides a clean white shirt and a cool glass of milk, before he places his protective hand upon her swollen abdomen. The whole image is filmed with Abramović upside down and Abramović's emotional response to the thought of this blissful fantasy is evident as the image abruptly ends, and with it her feelings of fulfilment. *The Onion* (1995), another contrast, focuses on dissatisfaction. Abramović makes statement after statement about the areas of her life that distress her; the Yugoslav war, the endless travelling, the absence of a social life. Each statement is followed by Abramović hungrily biting a section of the onion she is holding, then chewing and swallowing it.

The action causes her eyes to stream, but she continues regardless, as if the discomfort is part of the punishment for her shortcomings, and her disillusionment must be confessed to camera. The third piece, *In Between* (1995), while it is still a video installation, is deliberately screened off from the main space of the gallery. Each person entering the space must sign an agreement to stay for the entire 40 minutes. Signing this contract-to-remain also encourages participants to be complicit with the instructions given to all present.

The aim of the spoken monologue used in this piece is to communicate vocally with the passive participants who sit blindfolded in the space. They are advised to relax and breathe. However, the tactics used to encourage repose do not help participants when they are asked to remove their blindfolds. Now they are faced with close-up images of Abramović's flesh. A needle, pushed against the skin, moves around Abramović's body in a way that creates tension and uncertainty as at any moment the needle could puncture the form it traces. This is particularly the case when Abramović reaches her eye, and the needle seems to move too close to this ever-so fragile organ. The instructions for breathing, however, continue. After a time the images come to an end and participants are asked to remove their headphones and go. As critic Jan Avgikos notes 'Physical ordeal is inherent to Abramović's work and is often the situational ground upon which such abreactive events as cleansing, depletion, and departure – recurrent themes for twenty years or more in her art – are staged' (Abramović *et al.*, 1998: 341). Avgikos's reading of Abramović's pieces as 'abreactive' suggests the work functions cathartically, and indeed the works are all, in one way or another, working through highly personal material, some of which draws on fantasy and some on the harsher, less glamorous realities of her existence. In openly drawing attention to what Abramović sees as the frustrations and shortcomings of her life and herself, these works are a departure from most of her live performances, where the concept at the centre of her performance seems to have been distilled far beyond the directly personal. Even in *Biography*, where her own life is the source material and directly represented, less is overtly revealed. This perhaps has something to do with the intimacy created by the camera and the confessional possibilities of the close-up used in these video pieces.

Video installations, set up in isolation, largely rule out the potential for spectator interactivity. From this point of view, they can be seen as separate from her general project for the democratization of art.

The works are all made during live performances. The video record runs in real time; even the sounds of the actions performed during the time of the performance remain as they were in performance. However, this does not mean that the tape is produced in one take. Abramović has, on occasion, performed and re-performed a piece to ensure that the video record reaches her exacting standards. *The Onion* (1995), for example, was recorded several times before Abramović was happy with the results; something that is common practice in film-making but newer to performance art with its conventional ontological emphasis on the transitory, unique and unrepeatable. In this instance, the accumulated effect of repeatedly having to eat onions pushed Abramović to the heights she wanted to achieve. Her throat, burned by her efforts, took some weeks to heal, but the passion and commitment of her action and the words of text she spoke remain intensely visible in the resulting product.

Cleaning the Mirror I, II, and III (1995) were created especially for an exhibition at Oxford's Museum of Modern Art. The thematic concern of these works is death. Indeed, confronting the idea of death is something that continues to be a preoccupation of Abramović as a recent photographic self-portrait featuring a skeleton testifies. As was mentioned in Chapter 1 of this book, the first of the *Cleaning the Mirror* pieces consists of a stack of monitors, placed one on top of another. Each screen focuses on a portion of the upright body – or rather the skeletal remains of that part of the body – which are scrubbed. In the second piece, Abramović is seen on a single monitor with a skeleton, while in the third piece Abramović explores objects in the Pitts River Museum. The museum allowed Abramović to select a number of objects with each of which she spent time, not handling the object but making herself sensitive to the object's energies by holding her hands above it. The title of this group of video works and elements of the method used to create the work directly relate to the Zen Buddhist idea of 'cleaning the mirror' or preparing for your own death by confronting your fear of death. The work itself can be related to Buddhist exercises that include such things as sleeping with a corpse or dancing with a corpse, holding the tongue of the corpse in your mouth to breathe air into the expired lungs. These practices are described in Alexandra David-Néel's controversial book *Magic and Mystery in Tibet* (first published in 1929). While a number of David-Néel's accounts of events in the book have been challenged as unreliable or unverifiable, it is a book to which Abramović has referred in a number of her publications, including

Cleaning the House (1995). The book presents itself as the true record of David-Néel's experiences of lamas, magicians and hermits in Tibet, where she lived for 14 years. She left for Tibet in 1923 at the age of 55. She was the first Western woman to travel to this region, undertaking her extraordinary journey at a time when Tibet was a mysterious, closed country. The emphasis of the book is on describing psychic phenomena and monastic training practices, and it is to these things that Abramović has looked for inspiration. In particular, Abramović has clearly been fascinated by Buddhist claims concerning telepathy; a direct communication that does not require intermediary objects. In David-Néel's book the training used to cultivate telepathy is outlined, although it also explains that telepathic communication may take years to perfect: 'First, it is necessary to go through all the practices devised to produce the trance of "one-pointedness", the concentration of thought on one single object and complete oblivion of all other things' (David-Néel: 1971, 232).

Exercises Abramović has undertaken, where a white wall is stared at for seven hours or a primary colour gazed at for three, are the sorts of preparatory exercises used to achieve a state where the mind is emptied and a state of 'complete silence and blankness' is achieved. The novice monk in this condition may then find themselves subject to 'sudden, apparently inexplicable, psychic or even physical sensations or moods of the mind, such as abrupt feelings of joy, of melancholy, of fear, and also sudden memories unconnected with anything going on around one' (David-Néel: 1971, 232). After reporting his findings to his master the novice practices alone in a darkened room. The involuntary sensations must then be observed after the novice ensures that his own mind is emptied of its own thoughts. Once this stage is reached the novice is expected to make himself receptive to the thoughts, images and sensations that his master is mentally suggesting to him. In discussion with his master, the novice can determine his progress. His master will continue to mentally communicate orders to the novice, gradually increasing the distance between the two. Novices then transmit messages to each other as a means of testing their powers. However, David-Néel observed that many of the most respected lamas consider the acquisition of such skills to be childish and a poor use of effort.

Interestingly, during her time performing *The House with an Ocean View* (2002) Abramović has described her experience in terms that suggest that she was picking up the thoughts and emotions of those who came to see her in a manner that recalls something of the telepathic connection

described above (see Chapter 3). While Abramović might not consider her aim to be telepathic communication she is certainly an advocate of non-verbal, non-physical exchanges and the sort of discriminating receptivity designed to heighten the connection between people and the world around them.

EXTENDED RECEPTIVITY

In addition to her work with crystals, metals and other materials, she has explored working with ritual objects selected from diverse cultures. 'At first I did not want to know the purpose of the object. I wanted to know whether, as an artist, I was receptive and capable of perceiving the energy that the objects emitted; I wanted to function as a mirror' (Abramović with Celant, 2001: 27) In 1989, with a group of other artists, she was permitted to enter the galleries of the Louvre in Paris for 24 hours every Tuesday for a period of a month. The idea was that each artist would have the opportunity to find an object or objects that would inspire their art. During this time she was able freely to explore the museum. Instead of reading the labels on the objects she approached, she tried to avoid identifying things. Each night, she found herself drawn to two particular sections; the Somalian and the Egyptian. On her final night in the museum she found that she was strongly drawn to an object and when she touched it she discovered, to her surprise, that it aroused her sexually. Later that night she went back to the object and found that her sense of arousal returned when she handled it. Finally, she decided to look at the label to find out what it was that was having such a powerful effect on her. The object, inscribed with scorpions, was a sacred fertility object from Babylon, several thousand years old. It was used by women who wanted to become pregnant. They would hold or sit on the phallus-shaped object (Abramović *et al.*, 1998: 411). Her subsequent work with objects has not been uneventful. The power or perhaps the danger still present in these objects is alluded to when Abramović mentioned that after working with objects in the Pitts Rivers Museum for a fortnight she became very ill.

Another book that is of clear significance for Abramović is *The Morning of the Magicians* first published in 1960 (Pauwels and Bergier, 2001). The fact that this book was republished early in the twentieth-first century is significant for it suggests that there is a new millennial flavour to the work. This book, like pages from David-Néel's book,

appear in her *Cleaning the House* (1995) publication which is richly illustrated with images of physical and spiritual practices taken from a variety of religious and/or cultural traditions. It is in *The Morning of the Magicians* that connections are made between science, mathematics and spiritual concepts. This book points to a number of recorded instances when parallel observations were made by mathematicians and by those undergoing spiritual experiences. For instance, in this account it is possible to see similarities between a paradoxical example cited by the famous mathematicians Banach and Tarski and the claims of Hindus who are experts in the Samadhi technique. According to Banach and Tarski:

it is possible to take a sphere of normal dimensions, such as an apple, for example, or a tennis ball, and to cut it up into slices and then to reassemble the slices so as to produce a sphere smaller than an atom or bigger than the Sun.

(Pauwels and Bergier, 2001: 278)

Compare this description to those of the Yogis: 'The siddhi of the Hindu Yogis are extraordinary, since they include the faculty of being able to make oneself as small as an atom, or as big as the Sun or the whole Universe!'. Pauwels and Bergier are keen to point out that the mathematics key to understanding both these situations is something that was known to ancient civilizations familiar with concepts of what Pauwels and Bergier call the 'Transfinite'. However, real empirical scientific evidence to support these claims is distinctly lacking and as with much 'mystical' literature of this period (1960s and 1970s) ideas and concepts from many faiths and cultures were freely interpreted and used by readers like Abramović for their own purposes. This sort of generalized cultural appropriation of 'exotic' spiritual and mystical practices was dominant in the world of Abramović's youth, but today it appears overbearing or at best naïve. For instance, the recurring dictum of this book seems to be that in looking to the past we are much more likely to have a better understanding of the future, for 'There is nothing new except what has been forgotten' (Pauwels and Bergier: 2001: 37). Abramović, however, continues to look to alternative sources of knowledge in order to better understand the contemporary world, and there may be much of value to be found if the source materials are respected.

Some of Abramović's concern with encouraging an extension of perceived bodily limits and exploring potentialities through performance resonates with further techniques described in *Magic and Mystery in Tibet*,

but also relates to the ascetic disciplines referred to earlier in this chapter. For example, there is a detailed account of the practice of *tumo*, a practice used by monks to keep themselves warm in the freezing cold of snow-clad mountains, even when naked or wearing thin clothes. The word *tumo* means heat or warmth, and as a practice it would qualify as a demonstration of 'mastery of fire'. To perform *tumo* is a test of the powers of the monk or hermit. David-Néel describes three types of *tumo*:

exoteric *tumo*, which arises spontaneously in the course of peculiar ruptures and gradually folds the mystic in the 'soft, warm mantle of the gods'; esoteric *tumo*, that keeps the hermits comfortable on the snowy hills; mystic *tumo*, which can only claim a distant and quite figurative connection with the term 'warmth', for it is the experience of 'paradisiac bliss' in this world.

(David-Néel, 1971: 217)

In the contemporary Western context there are rare occasions when a particularly determined person manages to exceed the limits of physiological expectation. Lewis Pugh has swum in both Arctic (2005) and Antarctic waters (2007) for around 20 minutes. He trained for his polar swims by swimming four times a week in water a couple of degrees above freezing. His experience can be compared with the monks' experience of *tumo* in spite of the fact that the monks and swimmer have come to the physical experience from differing standpoints. Pugh has said: 'as soon as I see the water, my temperature rockets up to 38° C' (Butcher, 2005: 24). His body immediately responds to the knowledge that it is about to get very cold and his core body temperature rises. While it is easy to be sceptical of this phenomenon, it is apparent from this example that such feats of metabolism are perfectly possible for anyone fit and prepared to train their body to acquire control over their thermo-regulatory system. It is likely that the monks have developed similar skills by sitting outside wrapped in sheets soaked in icy water, gently competing against each other to see who can dry the most sheets in a session. However, for most people in industrialized nations the extreme physical challenge posed by severe or prolonged cold, wet or heat is beyond what is constructed as desirable. Pugh swims to draw attention to global warming; he has an ecological aim beyond himself that motivates him. Other athletes perform for money and/or acclaim. This contrasts with the more esoteric aims of many challenging cultural practices as well as the aims of Abramović's performance work.

Abramović herself has experimented with cold. She lay naked on ice for *Warm Cold* (1975) and for *Lips of Thomas* (1975), which was re-performed in 2005 as part of *Seven Easy Pieces*. Even if she did not undertake any obvious physical training to carry out this action, Abramović's mental preparations for performance are considerable, if understated in most of her accounts. Indeed, it is difficult to pin Abramović down when it comes to discussing what things she does do to prepare for a performance because she claims that she does nothing. However, it would seem that this 'nothing' is a very specific sort of nothing and clearly there are mental processes taking place even if this does not amount to 'doing' anything. Abramović has admitted that three days before a performance she becomes quite agitated and feels both nerves and dizziness. Her ability to communicate with others at this time is also compromised. However, as soon as the public are present in the space and the performance begins she is able to enter into what she calls a 'performance state'; or ASC where her nervousness disappears and she is able to live the present moment. It is the performance itself, and presence of the public, that allows Abramović to create the extraordinary work that she does. The discipline and exactitude of her practice is something that comes from the experience of performance rather than from anything preconceived. The decision to make the work and the commitment that this necessarily implies is what is important, as are intention, willpower, presence and a willingness to see the process of the performance as another learning experience.

RETURN TO THE BALKANS

Since leaving the former Yugoslavia in 1975 Abramović has led a broadly nomadic existence, living in Holland and other parts of Europe before moving to North America. Initially, living and working outside the socialist Yugoslavian system sent her into a state of shock; it took time for her to get used to the much greater freedom of expression afforded Western artists. This freedom was not all positive, in fact she found it difficult to cope with because much of her earlier work had been about pushing against the constraints and limitations of, for example, communism, the family structure and bourgeois attitudes. In order to develop further in this new environment it was necessary for her to focus on much broader issues, that she saw as more universal. Unlike many of her female contemporaries in the West, she was not interested

in making overtly 'issue'-based or autobiographical art. She preferred to work with ideas and concepts that were far removed from the specifics of her early life. Today, she oscillates between Europe and the United States, reluctant to commit entirely to any particular location, preferring to see herself as a citizen of the world.

In the new century, however, there has been a significant shift in the sort of subject matter Abramović has chosen to work with. The Balkan conflict in the 1990s and her sense of grief and impotence at the events it entailed were in some ways responsible for her decision to reconnect to her largely suppressed (or ignored) sense of Serbian/Montenegrin national identity. It was during her performances of *Balkan Baroque* (1997) that she was shocked to discover the intensity of her own feelings, as she had been far more accustomed to a degree of emotional detachment when performing. This experience made it clear to Abramović that there was a need to return to and draw upon her cultural history and confront the issues of concern to people of this region today. This has not been an easy step to take. In common with many people who leave their country of origin for a protracted period of time, Abramović feels like an outsider when she returns. However, her position as an insider/outsider can bring fresh perspectives:

Only now can I see it, because I am far enough away – only in years, because it's been 35 years since I left – now I can deal with that material and I can really look through the past translated and twisted and understand what's happening.
(Abramović with Kontova, 2007: 106)

Since returning to visit, Abramović has completed a number of projects in her former homeland; at least one is transparent in its political engagement. *Count on Us* (2003) criticizes the United Nations (UN) with an ironic song of praise sung by children. Abramović worked with groups of schoolchildren to realize this project and achieve her aim of drawing attention to the failure of the UN to provide assistance to the people of the region during the conflict. Furthermore, her decision to work with children brought a new audience into contact with her work.

Other pieces, like the video presentation *Balkan Erotic Epic* (2005) came as a surprise to many of the people who consider themselves familiar with her work, including her Yugoslavian friends. The surprise is due to the erotic aspect of the work that draws upon and uses a combination of ancient fertility and protection rites with Abramović's own



Figure 2.4 *Balkan Erotic Epic*, 2005.

interpretative image-making. People unaware of many of the traditional practices of the region that have disappeared over time are shocked by what Abramović reveals. While the image-making is subject to Abramović's own interpretation and augmented by her own ideas, Abramović's reading of early texts provides the authentic bedrock and starting points for the work. Each section of the video is introduced and contextualized by a stern-looking Abramović, dressed in black, who introduces and explains the ideas behind each part before it is viewed. Abramović counters any objections to what she has done with her belief that her viewpoint as a Yugoslavian who had left and returned allows her insight into aspects of Yugoslavian culture that are rarely visible or have been suppressed by modern ideas of propriety.

THE PHYSICAL, THE SPIRITUAL

... since every creation is a divine work and hence an irruption of the sacred, it at the same time represents an irruption of creative energy into the world. Every creation springs from an abundance. The gods create out of an excess of power, and overflow of energy. Creation is accomplished by a surplus of ontological substance.

(Eliade, 1987: 97)

Aspects of Abramović's work and its sources of inspiration are often linked to or evoke a sense of performance as a spiritual experience. The generation of energy that plays such a central role in Abramović's form of expression has also, however, been a source of contention. There are those who are quick to dismiss any spiritual dimension to the experience of art as a whimsical product of New Age 'woolly-mindedness'. To speak of higher states of consciousness, 'traces of the soul' and an alternative experience of oneself through performance may provoke anxiety in the broadly secular, rationalist, technologically sophisticated twenty-first century Western individual. However, Abramović's concern with the spiritual dimensions of art is not something new for art or artists; indeed, art as a shamanic or religious practice reinforces a view of art and art-making as a way to capture or represent ideas, beliefs and desires beyond the mundane and tangible.

'Illumination' may not be just a metaphor. [It may be correlated with] an actual sensory [i.e. neurological] experience occurring when, in the cognitive act of unification, a liberation of [nervous electrical] energy takes place, or when a resolution of unconscious conflict occurs, permitting the experience of 'peace', 'presence', and the like. Liberated [charges of physical] energy *experienced as light* may be the core sensory experience of mysticism.

(Levin, 1988: 347)

The final section of this chapter takes a step back to consider energy as an electromagnetic force (i.e. at the level of physics) as well as energy interpreted as a manifestation of the 'soul', as it is in a number of religious traditions that Abramović has encountered. This is not done in an effort to provide definitive answers to the question of what happens during a performance when Abramović initiates an 'energy exchange', but is more of a preliminary enquiry into what is meant by this expression when it is used in relation to Abramović's (and sometimes her audience's) experiences.

SPIRITUAL ENERGY

Chakra is a Sanskrit word that means 'wheel'. Within tantric traditions of Hinduism, chakras consist of 'wheels' of energy that circulate around various regions of the body. They energize the region and awaken the function of that part of the body. The higher chakras all radiate from nerves between the spine and the cranium. In a single lifetime, two or three chakras are likely to dominate and influence the way an individual thinks and lives their life. The lower chakras circulate between the coccyx and

the heels, and if energy is predominantly in this region then one's animal nature is more manifest than if this energy were to be in the upper half of the body. If energy and awareness are flowing in the higher chakras, then consciousness is operating within our higher nature (Sundararajan and Mukerji, 1997: 218–21).

Some branches of Hinduism associate chakras with particular colours and tones, and in more recent times the different electromagnetic frequencies generated by each one have been noted (Hover-Kramer, 2002). Individual chakras respond to and transmit, on specific frequencies, the energies stored in the aura; while the chakra system as a whole deals with the complete electro-magnetic (EM) environment of a person. The higher order chakras, broadly speaking, mirror the colours of the rainbow, which are themselves a result of a splitting of light. In other words, light, energy and colour are all inextricably linked. This is something Abramović, as an artist, has not only been aware of, but has explored in many of her works. It is particularly apparent in her *Nightsea Crossing* work because of the way Ulay and Abramović chose to wear shirts and trousers made of a single block of colour: each performer wore a different colour from the other, and each performance used a different combination of colours. For instance, on one occasion Ulay might wear yellow while Abramović at the opposite end of the table wore blue with the aim of experimenting with different energy relationships generated by the performers and the colour. Abramović has even produced coloured clothes for spectators to wear when encountering some of her 'transitory objects'; some of these clothes include magnets designed to interact with a person's energy field or electro-magnetic environment.

THE ELECTRIC BODY AND CHAKRAS

The body produces electrical impulses that are responsible for neural activity throughout the body, including the heart and the brain. The result of this electrical activity can be measured by the amount of heat, magnetism and phosphorescence generated. The presence of magnetite in the brain (discovered in 1992) reinforces the suggestion that human experience and consciousness can be altered by magnetic fields (see Little, 2001: 12). Investigations and research into the electro-magnetic spectrum (EMS) suggest that what is usually not seen by humans under ordinary circumstances, may, under particular conditions, become manifest so that what is normally invisible and inaudible, becomes seen and



Figure 2.5 *Count on Us/Tesla Effect Coil, 2003.*

heard (Tiller, 1999: 41). The ability to see outside the ‘normal’ range of visible light to the ultra-violet or infra-red ranges may account for the experience of seeing auras around people or objects. According to the scientific writer Gregory Little, through an alteration in consciousness people can access parts of the EMS that are not normally perceived and that sometimes it is possible to focus these energies through the construction of a mound or circle. Little has also suggested that the magnetic field in our brains connecting with electromagnetic energy unconsciously links us to what is, or what is interpreted as, the spiritual world.

As this chapter has demonstrated, the practices Abramović has adopted in order to explore her physical and mental limits induce conditions that deliberately alter customary ways of perceiving the world. There is evidence to suggest that such practices, dismissed by some as ‘spiritual mumbo-jumbo’ or New Age nonsense, may in fact be tapping into very real physical forces, described above, working at an atomic level on both performer and spectators to create the ‘energy exchange’ so central to Abramović’s approach.

PAST, PRESENT, FUTURE

The future, as far as Abramović is concerned, lies in educating young people to be able to concentrate and meditate and learn about the possibilities of silence and 'emptiness'. Meditation produces a higher frequency wave pattern in the brain, and through the practice of meditation it is possible to experience a pan-dimensional awareness of oneself and one's environment where space and time are surpassed and one has a feeling of 'being-at-one-with-it-all'. Abramović believes such mind training should be taught to young people in school as a matter of routine. She says: 'If the Tibetans can learn, in four years, a technique for sitting in the snow at twenty degrees below zero without freezing, why can't we learn these techniques in school?' (Abramović *et al.*, 1998: 49). Abramović would also like to see physical techniques of the body, such as controlling the heartbeat and blood system, prioritized in the general education of youth so that many people have this knowledge. So, while challenging herself remains a core part of Abramović's motivation in making new work, passing on what she has learned to new practitioners has become increasingly important to her. One of the ways she has sought to implement this is through her International Performance Group, which was formed in 2003 and did, for several years, play an important role in disseminating her legacy.

While these emerging artists all work in their own way, they are all connected by their experiences of Abramović's teaching, which, in turn, has informed their working processes (see Chapter 4). However, this alone was not sufficient for Abramović who wanted to have a centre for performance art that remained true to her vision. To realize this project, Abramović sold her home in Amsterdam and bought a large property in Hudson, New York in December 2007, with the aim of transforming the building to provide facilities for performance, workshops and a research archive that would provide a lasting resource and legacy for future generations of artists.

KEY WORKS

EARLY WORKS UP TO 1975

Abramović's artwork, moving from an easel-based painterly tradition to working with the body, provided an interpretative challenge to Yugoslavian society in the late 1960s/early 1970s. This chapter will consider the sorts of challenges her work presented to audiences in her homeland as well as in venues she performed to in Western Europe in order to highlight some of her primary concerns as an artist working with the body under particular socio-political circumstances.

RHYTHM SERIES

The *Rhythm* series refers to a group of solo performances Abramović undertook in the mid-1970s. These works were a series of personal explorations that involved risk and, arguably, in the case of *Rhythm 10*, masochism. Central to this work is the issue of control. As a young artist emerging under Tito's communist regime, Abramović wanted to resist or at least question the imposed boundaries of control at both a personal and a political level. Meanwhile, at the same time as Abramović was making her *Rhythm* performances, some artists in Western Europe and the United States, such as Chris Burden, Gilbert and George and Valie Export were making works that conflated art and reality in ways that

were intended to shorten the distance between the audience and art-maker, thus blurring art/life distinctions. By contrast, the performance and artwork of Abramović at this time was much more concerned with a deliberate exploration of the limits of the physical body, enacted through high-risk performance strategies.

Following her first experiments with confrontational sound installations like *War* (1972) – a corridor of ear-splitting machine-gun fire – her early performance works, while equally provocative, worked directly with her own body. The first in the series, *Rhythm 10* (1973) uses knives hitting a surface to create a complex rhythm and a heightened sense of risk. When Abramović first performed this piece at the Edinburgh Festival in 1973 she did so using ten knives. This was one of her first performances abroad. The piece was performed again in the same year at the Museo d'Arte Contemporanea, Rome, using 20 knives. The only other pieces of equipment used were two tape recorders and microphones.

With her left hand outspread on a white cloth on the floor, Abramović rapidly stabbed between each of her fingers in turn with the first of the



Figure 3.1 *Rhythm 10*, 1973.

knives. When she cut herself, she changed knives and continued, stopping only when all the knives had been used. An audio-tape recorded the entire performance. Once this had been done, Abramović listened to the audio recording of the performance so far, and then carried out the same actions again, cutting herself in the same places at the same time as in the first half of the performance. In other words, although Abramović was undertaking a series of painful actions, her concentration and control were such that she could re-enact, up to a point, her original actions.

Although clearly painful, the process of *Rhythm 10* can be interpreted as empowering rather than destructive. While suspense mounted, as neither spectators nor Abramović knew where or when the knife would fall and cut, halfway through the performance Abramović took control over these apparently random events, and re-inscribed the cutting by a close reproduction of her original actions during the first half of the performance. This was a performance game carefully set up and her ability to carry out these actions and re-do them with such a high degree of precision was evidence of her capacity to endure and control events in a way that was personally empowering. However, this remains a particularly disturbing performance for viewers, who had already witnessed Abramović take each knife in turn until an error of judgement resulted in a laceration. They might well have assumed that after each of the knives had been used the performance was complete, perhaps experiencing a cathartic release at the final knife cut. Their relief, however, would have been short-lived as the re-cutting and re-opening of the incisions amounted to a second assault. As Abramović later observed of her audience (Abramović uses the male pronoun but her comments apply equally to a male or female spectator): 'He wasn't sure anymore, he was unbalanced and this made a void in him. And he had to stay in this void. I didn't give him anything' (Abramović with Kontova, 1978: 43).

These comments are interesting because they suggest that in the experience of her performance the audience rather than the performer become submissive. Abramović's performance enacts a reversal that plays with audience/performer dynamics. It is also interesting that Abramović chose to use the male pronoun when referring to her audience: 'I didn't give him anything'. Abramović claims power for herself throughout these actions of apparent self-mutilation, suggesting that in her ability to control her own actions and pain she has strength beyond the spectator, who remains inert, watching. Alternatively, her words and action could be interpreted in terms of repression where the aggressive energy she feels towards the

other, is played out upon herself. What is particularly significant about this performance was that the process set in motion worked differently from the later *Rhythm* performances that were deliberately experimenting with limiting or removing Abramović's control over the outcome of events.

CONTROL, RISK AND THE UNCONTROLLABLE

All of the *Rhythm* performance works involved considerable risk. The type and degree of risk was not, however, always a deliberate decision. During *Rhythm 5*, a work also carried out in 1974, Abramović marked out with wood a large star (around 6 metres in diameter) in the courtyard of the SKC. She filled the star with wood chips and 100 litres of petrol. When it became dark she set the star alight and started to walk around it, ritually cleansing herself through a cutting of her hair and nails which she threw into the fire. She then entered the star, placing herself in a horizontal position at the centre of the rapidly burning frame, after a brief period standing in the centre of the star with her arms outstretched. These sacrificial actions had a readily communicable symbolism in the context of Belgrade in the 1970s: we young people are burning in the flames of your, the older generation's, socialist ideals. Abramović, although she had carefully planned each action, was unaware that the level of oxygen within the star would be reduced as the fire burned. The smoke that then came to surround her prone body soon caused her to lose consciousness. It was only when two of her colleagues, Radomir Damnjan and Gergelj Urkom, both artists associated with the SKC, detected that Abramović was not responding to the flames that came so close to her legs, that they entered the star and carried her to safety. Without their intervention this performance might have become more than a symbolic sacrifice.

Abramović was angered by the unexpected outcome of *Rhythm 5*, because she realized there were limits to what she could do with her body when performing. However, aside from prompting this realization, the performance had also created a different sort of performer/audience relationship; a relationship that has been the source of much debate as people argue over the responsibility and role of the artist and spectator when confronted by such risky performance strategies.

Undeterred, the disappointment of *Rhythm 5*'s ending motivated Abramović to look at how the body could be used beyond consciousness in performance. The result was *Rhythm 2* (1974), which she performed in Zagreb. In order to obtain the medication she wanted to

use in this performance, she went to a hospital for people with mental health issues and seduced one of the doctors so that he would give her one drug used to calm and another drug used to treat people who experience catatonic episodes. In the Gallery of Contemporary Art, Zagreb, where she performed *Rhythm 2*, she sat in front of the audience and took the pill for catatonia. The effect of the pill was to cause her to move uncontrollably for about 50 minutes. Fortunately, while this happened her mind remained clear. For the second half of the performance Abramović took a pill for aggression, but before this the audience was given a 15-minute break during which they listened to Slavic folksongs on a radio which Abramović had tuned at random. The pacifying effect of the pill that Abramović took next was to last six hours. During this time Abramović remained seated and smiling; an experience she recalls very little about. Abramović has said that this performance demonstrates loss of control and control, 'there was this opposition, first not controlling my body, then controlling it' (Abramović *et al.*, 1998: 15), but once the pills had been taken during each section of the performance, and the drug had reached her bloodstream then the way her body reacted was, in certain fundamental ways, beyond her control; that is, the substance of the pill itself effectively overrode Abramović's ability to control it.

With *Rhythm 4* (1974) she went a step further by using an air blower, normally used to inflate pneumatic tents, on her face. This meant that a large volume of air was blown at her under very high pressure. For this performance, Abramović remained in a room separate from the audience, who saw her on a screen in the gallery (Galleria Diagramma, Milan). The air distorted her features so that it looked as if she was underwater. After a short time, the excessive amount of air caused her to lose consciousness, but the pressure of the air held her where she was. She remained in this position, unconscious, for three minutes. The audience, viewing her from a separate space, were not aware of her condition. Through this performance she achieved what had eluded her in *Rhythm 5*; she managed to perform both in and out of consciousness. The fact that this was only achieved by being physically separated from her audience does not seem to have lessened her sense of having shifted a fundamental performance barrier.

RHYTHM 0 (1974)

The instructions for *Rhythm 0*, the last of the *Rhythm* performances, were simple. 'There are 72 objects on the table that one can use on me

as desired. I am the object. During the period I take full responsibility' (Abramović *et al.*, 1998: 84). The items laid out included:

a pistol, an axe, a fork, a bottle of perfume, a bell, a feather, chains, nails, needles, scissors, a pen, a book, a hammer, a saw, a lamb bone, a newspaper, grapes, olive oil, a rosemary branch, a rose and other things.

(Iles *et al.*, 1995: 46)

The performance took place in the Studio Morra, Naples in the six hours between 8 p.m. and 2 a.m. As a consequence of her performance choices, Abramović left herself open to invasion and even abuse; this was precisely the point. The work is constructed through the interaction of the spectator with the objects and her body. How the spectators took up the opportunities presented to them certainly revealed something of the dynamics of group psychology where a collective presence may anonymize individual action and decision-making. As such, exposing herself to this group situation was potentially a more dangerous situation than setting out the same scenario for a one-to-one encounter because responsibility for actions is shifted from the individual to the collective with group members encouraging each other to push the boundaries and experiment with the objects on offer.

In its objectification of the performer the work echoes an earlier piece by the artist Yoko Ono entitled *Cut Piece* (1964/5/6) that Ono first performed in Japan and then at New York's Carnegie Hall. In Ono's piece, she kneels in front of the audience and allows any member of the audience, to cut her clothing while she remains passive. What is perhaps surprising in Ono's performance is that spectators only used the scissors to cut the material of her clothing and did not attempt to cut her body or hair. The limits the audience appear to have imposed on themselves mark this performance out as one from the early 1960s rather than the 1970s and it is fair to say that audiences were still relatively unaccustomed to invitations to become participants in performances like Ono's. However, in a revival of this performance in September 2003 at the Ranelagh theatre, Paris, Yoko Ono asked people to cut a piece of her clothing and send it to a loved one. Interestingly, participants who took up the scissors, again did not push beyond the request made by the artist and cut 'inappropriately'. Their compliance this time probably had more to do with the performance's venue in a Parisian theatre, the established reputation of the artist (and this form of art) as well as respect for a woman

of mature years who wished to convey a message of peace and demonstrate the need for people to trust each other.

Of the 72 items laid out for Abramović's performance, some were chosen with pleasure in mind, whereas others definitely suggested pain. Abramović adopted a motionless position next to these objects, while the director of the gallery announced that the artist would remain passive for the next six hours and would comply with whatever the audience chose to do to her. At first the audience/participants were content to undertake relatively small interventions, such as placing a thorny rose in her hands and then across her body, photographing her and placing the results in her hands to display, writing on her, kissing her and moving her body around. It is clear from the photographic record of this piece that these activities had already caused a certain amount of distress to Abramović and an audience member at one point takes a handkerchief and wipes the tears from her face.

There are a number of descriptions of this performance (Goldberg, 1998: 165; Archer, 1995: 117–18; Warr, 1995: 11). These accounts vary in their specifics but gradually, as time passed, and the boundaries of her subjectivity remained unguarded, more challenging and harmful possibilities occurred to members of the audience. Thomas McEvelley has provided a first-hand account which relates how the audience for the piece was 'a random crowd brought in off the street, with some art world aficionados' (Iles *et al.*, 1995: 46). He described how: 'In the third hour all her clothes were cut from her with razor blades. Her throat was slashed so someone could suck her blood ... She was so committed to the piece that she would not have resisted rape or murder' (McEvelley, 2005: 273) and, indeed, a loaded pistol was placed in her hands, manipulated so that her fingers grasped the trigger, and the barrel pointed at her head. Even at this point Abramović did not terminate the performance. It was only the intervention of concerned audience members who grouped together that perhaps prevented the piece from becoming a crime scene. McEvelley wrote: 'When the art world constituency rebelled against the aggressive outsiders, the event was declared over' (Iles *et al.*, 1995: 46), implying that the spectators formed groups on the basis of their knowledge/experience of art. In other words, those that upheld the event as art behaved in a much more restrained manner than those that saw the event as an opportunity to take liberties and push Abramović as far as they could. Abramović, however, describes the ending a little differently, emphasizing the fear spectators had of her once the performance was concluded:

I started walking to the public and everybody ran away and never actually confronted with me. The experience I drew from this piece was that in your own performances you can go very far, but you leave decisions to the public, you can be killed.

(Abramović, 2002: 30)

In her attempt to address the question of how the audience might respond to the freedom given to them, and where they might draw the lines, Abramović was pushed beyond the conventional limits of interpersonal interaction. In abdicating control and allowing the audience to use her as an object, her performance choice suggests an abandonment of responsibility and/or an incitement to power play. Was her passivity a brave display of her drive to walk the outer limits of experience, an exploration of her fundamental trust in human nature or a careless abandonment of her subjectivity? Or was it, as Franc Chamberlain suggests ‘a continuing act of aggression directed at herself that later becomes transformed into a less violent attempt to get beyond the neuroses of the ego’? Whatever her motivation, it is clear that at this time she was willing to risk everything to follow her impulses. Indeed, in 1970 she even submitted a proposal to the Galereija Doma Omladine, Belgrade for a performance (*Untitled Proposal*) in which she planned to dress in the clothes her mother would have chosen for her to wear and



Figure 3.2 *Rhythm 0*, 1974.

then place a gun loaded with one bullet to her temple. For Abramović, this piece has two possible endings, one of which ends with the trigger being pulled and Abramović presumably dying or at the least sustaining a head wound. The alternative ending has the trigger being pulled without fatal or mortal consequences, in which case she would redress the way she wanted to dress and then go her own way. It is as if 'she would rather kill herself than be bound by the rules of Western civilization' (Abramović *et al.*, 1998: 25).

It is also important to note that the *Rhythm 0* performance provoked very mixed critical response, as well as a certain amount of hostility. In common with the performance work of the other five artists with whom Abramović sometimes exhibited, this performance (and the subsequent exhibition of the performance documentation of all the *Rhythm* performances) was not widely accepted by the public or the media. As a woman, Abramović, in particular attracted censure. One Serbian publication *Jež* made fun of the provocation, implying that if she had performed her work in Serbia rather than Naples then they would be able to understand 'body art' as 'nabodi' art too (the word 'nabodi' suggesting penetration) and that, as she was not too bad to look at, someone might be able to 'use' her (Bojičić quoted in Dimitrijević, 2004: 7). It is hard to appreciate just how radical Abramović's actions were at this time without remembering that she was both a citizen of a repressive socialist state and a woman in a male-dominated sphere, neither of which were likely to take her actions very seriously.

In these performances the audience's calculation of risk may make them uneasy and perhaps anxious that she may come to harm. This essentially reconfigures the traditional audience/performer relationship where there is usually an unspoken arrangement/contract that places the audience in a position of relative physical passivity. The audience of such performances become uneasy observers of the activities of a woman who, through their own determination of risk, might be interpreted as 'out of control'. Spectators placed under such conditions may recast themselves as active agents ready to intervene as and when necessary 'for her own good'. While Abramović may have been drawing attention to how we understand and interpret risk and bodily sensations, she also opened up the possibility that her actions may be understood as an investigation of pathology. Although Abramović's risky performances raise some interesting questions in respect of our understanding of what is permissible and impermissible risk, her repudiation

of personal authority over what is done to, or happens to, her body becomes a compelling as well as problematic performance choice, particularly for a female performer. These works highlight just how easy it was for her body to become objectified and her own autonomy, as the person who placed herself in this position, to be dismissed. When women use pain in performance there is always the possibility that their actions may compound the viewers' sense of their 'natural' propensity towards submission and pain, understood as a sort of co-requisite of their biological function. The 'excess' manifest in performance may easily be misconstrued as mental disorder or even psychosis when it seems that the degree of her abandon has few limits and no concern for her own safety is outwardly expressed or made manifest.

By providing her audience with the 'real' body undergoing ritualistic acts of self-inflicted harm, Abramović demonstrated the depth of her devotion to achieving an alternative art to the point where she not only risked her physical integrity, moving through different states of consciousness, but she also risked her life in what she has described as 'a completely male approach, really go-for-it and heroism and the possibility of being killed and everything' (Abramović *et al.*, 1998: 16). The work did, undeniably, shock the audience out of the usual collective inertia typical of theatre and gallery audiences. Whether it was to act in relation to the objects or other audience members in *Rhythm 0* (1974) or whether it was to watch or take action in *Rhythm 5* (1974) or *Rhythm 10* (1973), they had to make choices. However, it would be far from the truth to say that these performances were founded on Abramović's interest in audience dynamics. Quite the reverse, these performances were all about exploring her personal limits – physical and familial. So while the audience were clearly important to her on one level, she was so absorbed in her own experimentation that in most ways the audience were never the central factor or driving force for her. It was only some time later that her focus shifted and her interest in the reciprocal relationship of the performer and audience became central to her practice. Nonetheless, what these early performances certainly did, and continue to do, is raise questions about the role and function of the audience/witness in performance, as well draw attention to the increasingly fuzzy distinctions between reality and representation, art and life.

The blurring and consequent confusion created by the increasing conflation of art and life in many spheres of performance, and the

refusal to allow a distance-producing gap to open up between reality and representation, clearly undermined the usual boundaries that operate to create audience/performer ‘safety’ or comfort zones and a ‘frame’ through which the audience may distinguish ‘art’ from ‘life’. But this challenge to perception is not new. Attempts to universalize art, that is, to see art in everything and every action has been a significant preoccupation for many artists since Marcel Duchamp. In an attempt to shift our understanding of what art could be or mean Duchamp, almost arbitrarily, designated objects as art. The most notorious example of this was his piece *Fountain* (1917), which was a shop-bought urinal that he signed R. Mutt and submitted to the first exhibition of the Society of Independent Artists at the Grand Central Palace Academy, Paris. The Society refused to exhibit the work. Since the time of Duchamp, other artists have played with the idea. Piero Manzoni, for instance, signed living people (usually naked women) with his name and called the work *Living Sculpture* (1961). Dennis Oppenheim marked out pieces of land with ‘site-markers’ to make art.

In the performance world, **Allan Kaprow** initiated many of the events that came to be known as Happenings in order that ‘the line between art and life should be kept as fluid, and perhaps as indistinct, as possible’ (McEvilley, 1983: 63). However, this process of ‘universal appropriation’ of any aspect of the world as art has certain limits. The action may be real but has semantically become a ‘shadow-real’ as it is categorized as art. So, while it may be seen to reflect all the world, it still remains a shadow in that world, that will continually regress as one appropriation is appropriated and re-appropriated infinitely. This led Yves Klein to the core of the problem, announcing ‘The painter only has to create one masterpiece, himself, constantly’ bringing the idea that the artist *is* the art to the centre of artistic discourse at this time and posing the, perhaps unanswerable, question: can the artist be distinguished from their art? It is precisely these sorts of issues that complicate our reception of Abramović’s early work.

COLLABORATIVE PERIOD 1975–88 – NIGHTSEA CROSSING AND THE LOVERS: THE GREAT WALL WALK

During the time of their collaboration, Abramović and Ulay (Uwe E. Laysiepen), worked in a variety of ways that physically extended the limits

of the performing body and explored the creative possibilities of two bodies making performance art. Many of their performances were concerned with emptying out the body and mind through exhaustive processes, some of which had no predetermined limit. This desire to create through overextension, pushing to the limits of the physical and mental, continued in their joint ventures. This chapter will examine their approach in two key works: *Nightsea Crossing* (1981–86), which is carried out in complete stillness, and *The Lovers: The Great Wall Walk* (1988) that relies entirely on motion.

While Ulay and Abramović worked together for over a decade, these two works can only really be considered representative of the final years of Abramović's working partnership with Ulay, with whom Abramović first started working in 1976. These works can, however, be taken as a culmination of many of the ideas explored in their earlier performances. It is rarely mentioned, but Ulay was an artist in his own right before working with Abramović. He had an unconventional approach to art-making that was based on his own lived experiments. For instance, he spent two years dressing as a female and spending time with transsexuals and transvestites. He did this before he spent a year living as someone with a mental impairment, interacting with and mirroring people with severe physical abnormalities (Schimmel, 1998: 101). Ulay's totally immersive approach was something he fruitfully brought to his work with Abramović and it is something that is particularly evident in both *Nightsea Crossing* and *The Lovers: The Great Wall Walk*.

NIGHTSEA CROSSING (1981–86)

Nightsea Crossing is one of the best known of the Ulay/Abramović combined works. This performance was undertaken 90 times between 1981 and 1986 in a number of cities around the world including Sydney, Berlin, Cologne, Amsterdam, Ghent, Helsinki, Lisbon, Ushimado in Japan and Sao Paulo in Brazil.

It meant crossing the ocean of the unconscious. For hours and hours we didn't do anything except sit at a table and look at each other. It opened the doors to perception to us and we were surfing different mental states.

(Abramović *et al.*, 1998: 410)

It was, by Abramović's own admission, one of their most challenging works. The piece consists of the two performers seated at either end of

a long table facing each other. They remained in this position completely inert for the duration of the piece, which took place without interruption, throughout the gallery's opening hours (usually around 7 hours). The idea behind this was that the spectator would never see a beginning or an end to the performance and would thus only have an image or memory of its continuity; as if the performers might sustain this position indefinitely. Abramović and Ulay carried out this performance as: 'Their tribute to the cultures – Indian, Tibetan, Australian, Aboriginal – in which ceremonies and meditation techniques had been developed to take the practitioner close to the state of death' (MacRitchie, 1996: 31).

In order to survive this long, painful performance it was necessary for the performers to be highly disciplined. In essence, the point was not to journey mentally beyond their present circumstances but to experience the 'here and now' in a way that most of us just do not; we instead live perpetually in the past or the future. When spectators came they would often stay much longer than they would have expected to, without really being able to identify what had happened or why. This was the sort of effect the couple's work had on spectators. In practice, the piece allowed the performers and certain spectators to experience something that might be described as a break with *linear* time, so that the depth of time can be explored. This experience, which has parallels with the observations made by spectators coming to *The House with the Ocean View* (2005) could be described as 'flow'; the sense of being oblivious to the passing of time. When individuals are 'in the flow' they are fully engaged with an activity and feel a sense of fulfilment, they may:

temporarily lose their normal sense of time, merge action and awareness leading to a temporary loss of ego, experience an enhanced or transcendent sense of self and intense closeness (Victor Turner's *communitas*), sometimes euphoric, with others sharing their liminal state.

(Rountree, 2006: 99)

As has been noted earlier in this book, the concept for this performance came about as a result of spending an extended period of time during 1980 in isolation in the Central Australian desert; a place where the temperatures during the day rose to the point where motion was no longer viable. As a result of these conditions much of their day was spent in stillness and, as an extension of this, they chose to remain silent. Enormous self-control was necessary to cope with these specific

conditions. These conditions of stillness and silence taught them a sort of watchfulness that allowed them to observe minutely the smallest things. As Ulay observed: ‘The company of the lizard is enough – to watch its throat pulsing’ (McEvelley, 2005: 280). Once they had spent this time in the desert and gained the acceptance of a tribe of Aboriginal people close to their camp, Abramović and Ulay wished to bring something of their desert experiences back to the European context. This may be construed as cultural appropriation but it is clear that, rather than using these survival techniques for a performance gimmick, the couple wished to bring the ideas behind such discipline to a Western audience with its obsession with the lack and waste of ‘time’. The invitation or challenge to the audience was to participate in their shared stillness and let that be enough. In this respect Ulay and Abramović’s performance choices have much in common with the spiritual and religious practices of silence and stillness (see Chapter 2). For Western spectators however, it is likely that those observing *Nightsea Crossing* (Figure 3.3), while they would marvel at the performers tenacity, would wonder how they managed to sustain such a



Figure 3.3 *Nightsea Crossing*, performed numerous times all over the world between 1981 and 1986.

gruelling ordeal for so long. Such inertia is antithetical to a culture that places such emphasis on dynamism and change.

Through motionlessness Ulay and Abramović believed they went beyond the limits of the corporeal body, chained as it is to sensation, to experience periods of insight and clarity. But, for the spectator, the performers drew into sharp focus the relative nature of time. In this way the arbitrary nature of the time-based constraints we live by in Western society, that dictate a rigid code of timetabling and specific duration-driven imperatives is highlighted, revealed as a product of our acculturated existence as members of a capitalist-based economy where 'time equals money'. Consequently, this performance may be interpreted as effecting a reversal, thereby exposing the viewer to the practice of everyday submission undertaken by most of us who find ourselves running to keep pace with the clock's ticking. Observers come and go, impelled by pressures to be elsewhere, whereas this couple, self-contained and sealed off by their shared stare, live the moment, by the moment, apparently unperturbed by what occurs beyond their mutual vision. The performance highlighted how bound observers were by the sort of **disciplinary power** expounded by Michel Foucault. The stillness and extended duration of the performance allowed Abramović and Ulay to be temporarily freed from the usual constraints of contemporary subjectivity.

But it was not simply that Ulay and Abramović sat not moving, they tried not even to blink. This was because Abramović believed that with every blink a new thought process is begun: 'If you stop blinking, somehow the time stops and that, actually, after one day was unbearable' (Greenfield, 2002: n.p.) This connection between eye movement and thought can, like many ideas circulating in Abramović's work, be traced to Buddhism's Abhidharmic approach to enlightenment. This method advocates introspection and the sort of meditative practices that slow down one's sense of time, so that each moment can be examined in minute detail. For those that can attain this state, consciousness itself can be observed and it is realized that the self, or one's illusory sense of self, is really just made up of a series of disconnected moments that, under 'ordinary' circumstances, run so quickly that we have the impression of a continuum when, at an atomic level, such a continuum does not exist. In essence, the self is not a fixed discrete object or thing, but is an illusion that arises out of 'an ever-flowing process' (Lama Govinda in McEvelley, 1991: 110) of 'mind-moments'. Mind moments, in Abhidharmic analysis, exist for a mere billionth of an eye-blink, so to

consciously resist the action of the eyes, as Ulay and Abramović have done, was part of an attempt to slow thought processes down so that the possibility of experiencing 'selflessness' or the type of atomic consciousness described above, might be possible.

Abramović's description of her experience during a performance of *Nightsea Crossing* is illuminating in this respect:

It was totally unbearable, because after already two hours, the body wants to move, all the blood, the circulation stopped, you experience enormous pain and if you really build your will-power very strong and you say, I don't move no matter what and you go over this and then at one point it's so unbearable that I'm going to lose my mind, I'm going to lose consciousness, what's the big deal? In that moment something really clicks and all your pain stopped totally, I mean there was no pain and really, the experience of the sensation of the here and now was so strong. It was the first time that actually I felt that my thinking process stopped and this was an extremely important experience ...

(Greenfield, 2002: n.p.)

Abramović has also spoken of a heightened sense of smell that she developed after the first few days of performing. Additionally, she claimed to experience a gradual increase in her field of vision, so that it initially widened to 180° and then increased again so that she could see 360°; 'I literally could see all the public from my back' (Greenfield, 2002: n.p.). Whether Abramović's claim can be proved is perhaps less important than her sense that she was experiencing the 'here and now' without the usual mental distractions that everyday life produces, allowing her an insight into what she calls 'true reality' or what the Buddhist tradition calls 'not-self' or selflessness.

Beyond the durational and latent spiritual aspects of the piece, the surroundings in which the piece took place were also of great importance. The performance did not so much take place in a room, as become part of the architecture of the site. The material of space, the objects incorporated into the performance and the clothes worn by Ulay and Abramović were all significant and given careful attention in the planning of the performance. Both performers wore a uniform of shirt and trousers in a single block colour. Ulay always wore a different colour from Abramović and the colours changed from one performance to another. The single coloured costume that changes every day the performance is undertaken, is something Abramović used again in her more recent *The House with the Ocean View* (2005) and is linked to

Abramović's continued explorations of the energy and the particular qualities of different colours (see Chapter 2).

THE LOVERS: THE GREAT WALL WALK (1988)

The Wall is the spine of the dragon. There is a legend telling that if you travel along the whole wall by foot you will get the energy needed for eternal life.

(Abramović *et al.*, 1998: 410)

The Lovers: The Great Wall Walk (1988) was the couple's final performance. For this work, the two performers walked from opposite ends of the Great Wall of China towards each other; a distance of some 1,250 miles. The wall was reputedly built as a defence against Genghis Khan and Mongolian invasions. The layout of the wall, however, has long been considered to have astrological significance, indicated by the way in which its distinctive course is mirrored in the Milky Way (Kaulins, 2003: 359–60). The truth of this claim is hard to verify; however, the coastal beginning of the wall bears the inscription 'First path on earth' while the end of the wall reads 'Heroic path to the sky' (Abramović with Pijnappel, 1990: 60) perhaps reinforcing its astrological connection rather than its more pragmatic defensive purpose.

Ulay began his walk to the west (dry, heat) at Jao Yu Guan, which is on the south-western edge of the Gobi Desert, while Abramović started at Shanhaiguan by the Yellow Sea in the east (damp, cold), an area known as the dragon's head and which becomes forbiddingly mountainous. The journey, begun on 30 March 1988, took three months to complete. The wall's meandering path across the landscape took each walker through mile upon mile of difficult and dangerous terrain. Indeed, many parts of the wall, where Abramović insisted she walk are considered so physically difficult that even the experienced Chinese guides do not venture onto them. Danger or risk, as in so many of her works, was the means used by Abramović to focus her mind. The pain, exhaustion and repetitive act of walking were all ways of leaving the body behind so that a new state of consciousness could be achieved. 'It's like a gate to me, when the body gives up' (Carr, 1997: 69).

The walk was originally planned to investigate the relation between the two artists and with 'Mother Earth'. In order to set up the performance, the couple made repeated journeys to China; once in 1985, 1986 and 1987 before the walk itself in 1988. This was necessary in



Figure 3.4 *The Lovers: The Great Wall Walk, 1988.*

order to plan, negotiate and gain permission from officials in China to carry out the walk. This was a time when it was particularly difficult for Westerners to travel through this part of the world. The performance, when first planned, was to end in a marriage ceremony but, because the relationship between the performers had deteriorated before the walk finally began, they ended the walk along with their 12-year partnership at Er Lang Shan on 27 June 1988.

The walk was a symbolic act. In pacing along this ‘dragon of energy’; the only man-made structure visible from space, a conjunction was made between east and west. It was through the experience of walking the varied terrains of the wall that Abramović became interested in geomancy and the energy fields generated by the land and materials. ‘I realized that my state of mind was different according to the metals in the ground’ (Goy, 1990). Feng shui and geomancy base their philosophy on an ancient understanding of electromagnetic fields and their effects on human physiology and brain chemistry. Geomancy is a system that affects all cultural and physical structures – including people. Cosmic forces are controlled through geomantic principles so that ‘auspiciousness’ can be cultivated and/or preserved. Activities or rituals that enhance ‘auspiciousness’ are therefore of great importance. Feng shui is a practice that works to control ‘auspiciousness’ through ‘yin–yang

wuxing' or the binary forces of yin and yang and the five elements. Yin–yang comes from the *I Ching* (the Book of Changes) and the five elements are derived from ancient ritual practices of the Chinese based on 'interaction, confrontation and mutation between these elements' (Hesselink and Petty, 2005: 268–69). Many times during Abramović's journey, as night came she was invited to become a guest in small villages near the Wall. The older people would often regale Abramović with stories of the Wall that drew upon its geomantic properties.

The connection Abramović made with the ancient Chinese tradition of geomancy was particularly important to her evolution as an artist because of the way it directly informed her subsequent experimentation with the energy relationships of crystals, minerals and metals, which she continues to incorporate into her performance work in a variety of ways (see Chapter 2).

1988 TO THE PRESENT – BALKAN BAROQUE AND THE HOUSE WITH THE OCEAN VIEW

From 1988 to the present, Abramović has continued to focus, define and refine her approach. Investing herself in the next generation of artists, she has taken up visiting professorships and full professorships at institutions in Germany and France as well as lecturing and carrying out workshops worldwide. She has done this in addition to producing numerous acclaimed works. This work continues to extend her physical and psychical limits, but at the same time has come to relate more transparently to the changing global stage. In particular, the devastating conflict in the Balkans in the 1990s to which Abramović responded with *Balkan Baroque* (1997) and her tribute to New Yorkers following the 9/11 terrorist attacks: *The House with an Ocean View* (2002).

BALKAN BAROQUE (1997)

By the later half of the 1990s, Abramović's reputation in the West was well-established but, like many exiles, she has had an ambivalent relationship with her homeland, and her homeland with her. In 1997, Petar Ćuković, an art historian from Montenegro and director of the National Museum of Montenegro in Cetinje, was appointed commissioner for the Yugoslav pavilion for the 1997 Venice Biennale. While the choice of

artist to represent a country at the Biennale is made without the interference of the international community, it is inevitably a political as well as an artistic decision. It is also significant that, although the region has evolved and been reconfigured a number of times since it first exhibited in its own pavilion in the Venice Biennale in 1950, the pavilion retains the original title of 'Yugoslavia'. Čuković deliberated and then invited Abramović to be the former Yugoslavia's representative. This was the first time Yugoslavia had offered this opportunity to a woman working alone. Abramović did not immediately accept the invitation but was influenced to do so by the student protests in Belgrade that started on 17 November 1996. Students demonstrated against the state in peaceful ways that voiced their desire for a more democratic political system. While considering where this commission might lead her, she was also acutely aware of the sorts of recent atrocities that had blighted her homeland and, in particular, that women from many ethnic backgrounds had suffered huge losses and personal violation as a result of the war. She planned to construct an installation for the pavilion, in front of which she would perform for a number of days.

When the appointment of Abramović was announced in the daily newspaper *Pobjeda* on 23 January 1997 the choice immediately generated controversy. One of the reasons for this was cost. The cost of the proposed installation was estimated at around £55,000. However, this figure did not simply cover construction of the installation but included all the costs associated with mounting the project in Venice. Once the Biennale was over, the installation was to be given to the Museum of Montenegro. However, not only were the costs complained of, so too were Abramović's credentials as an 'authentic' national representative of the region that would reflect the nation's 'pluralism'. The officials associated with the selection process would have felt that a demonstration of national pluralism was more plausible with a delegate chosen from one of the officials' regions – Croatia or Slovenia, for example. After all, they argued, Abramović, had not lived in the Balkans for many years, so how could she possibly be considered a suitable representative of the ex-'Yugoslavia'? Čuković, however, thought differently: 'Those are the artists who spend the greatest parts of their lives in diaspora, the greatest part of their works being created in diaspora, in spite of the fact at the deepest levels of their being ... their homeland murmurs' (Hoptman, 2002: 332–33).

This opinion was clearly shared by the 1995 Polish commissioner for the Biennale, who chose Roman Opalka to represent Poland; an artist

who had lived for decades in the United States. Heated discussion in the Montenegrin and Serbian press ensued. The Minister of Culture in the Montenegrin Government, Goran Rakočević, expressed his disapproval of the choice of Abramović in a widely cited ‘private’ statement. He believed that ‘this outstanding opportunity ought to be used to represent authentic art from Montenegro, free of any complex of inferiority’ (Hoptman, 2002: 334). The problem was eventually resolved; Rakočević fired Čuković, rescinded the offer made to Abramović and then asked Vojo Stanić, a landscape painter, to replace her.

Abramović, however, received support and backing from the Italian Germano Celant, the curator of the Biennale, who gave her ample space to set up her installation in the Italian pavilion. Somewhat ironically perhaps, the work she produced for this event could hardly have been a more pertinent response to the divisive conflict that had so recently torn the Balkans. And while the piece used elements deemed to be ‘authentic’ she did not allow the stereotypical Western reading of the Balkans as primitive, barbaric and destined to repeat rather than learn from their mistakes, dominate her work.

Her installation, or ‘play’, *Balkan Baroque* (Figure 3.5), in fact won her the prestigious Golden Lion for Best Artist. The piece was part-installation, part-projection and part-performance and it occupied an entire floor of the pavilion. Some of the themes included were developed from her earlier work *Delusional* (1994). In the largest of the windowless rooms used for the piece, there were two copper sinks and one copper trough, all containing water. These were placed in the space both as a way of reflecting the flickering images projected on the screens and as a reference to the sort of ritual cleansing necessary to free the body and the mind. Two of the three video projections showed images of her parents; one devoted solely to her mother and another to her father. Their gestures on screens provide a backdrop and visual clue to Abramović’s historical and personal positioning as a daughter of a Serb and a Montenegrin; their inclusion ironically demonstrated Abramović’s inherent pluralism. And, as a device, it also brought to light her own sense of being connected to the recent combat in this part of the world and her shame at what this connection imputes. The third screen is given over to another story which Abramović herself presents. It begins with Abramović, clinically and authoritatively dressed in a white laboratory coat and heavy-rimmed glasses telling us how to catch a wolf-rat, a well-known Yugoslavian fable.

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 – To catch the rats you have to fill all their holes with water, leaving only one open. In this way you can catch 35–45 rats. You have to make sure 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 [sic] 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 [sic] 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.

(Abramović *et al.*, 1998: 380)

In the delivery of the story she betrayed no emotion. The story and its horrors were recounted matter-of-factly, in keeping with the clothes she adopted for this part of the video. The portraits of her parents mutely sign and gesture at either side of the unfolding story. Without the power to intervene, they remain stuck in their own memories of conflict. Then, suddenly, she removes the white coat, revealing a sexy black dress. She starts to dance, but her movements are disturbing rather than sensually alluring. In parallel with the story she tells, her penetrating gaze and uncomfortable dance reflect something of the mindless cruelties and the physical and psychological violations that characterized the embattled Balkan region in the 1990s.

When Abramović was present in person, as she was for six hours every day for four days, she carried out a number of actions. She danced to entertain her audience and sang ethnic folk songs from Eastern Europe that she recalled from her childhood. And, as with childhood songs, when she forgot the words she just hummed until she found her way again. Each day one song was chosen and she would repeat it again and again throughout the six hours until the song became more like a prayer. The song on day one was a Russian ballad popular in the 1950s,



Figure 3.5 *Balkan Baroque*, 1997.

on day two a Serbian song while the third day featured a Dalmatian folk song. If the performance had continued beyond the four days she would have included songs from every region of the former Yugoslavia. Singing in this way, among the bones of dead cattle, deliberately evoked the tradition of professional female mourners known as ‘narikača’ who, through their singing, would set the scene and assist in the process of mourning for families of the dead.

Aside from singing and dancing, she spent much of the time sitting on top of a huge pile of cattle bones dressed in a white dress, deeply stained by her efforts to clean the bloody gristle and detritus from these bones with a scrubbing brush. The sheer size of the pile dwarfed her, but she was also raised up by this mountain of remains in a way that created an image that was truly baroque in its excess. Abramović worked diligently at the bones and the recent past was all too readily evoked by these actions. For the audience, there was not only the image of a woman placed in the middle of an extraordinary mass of decomposing material, singing mournfully but there was also the smell of these remains, left out for days, powerfully contributing to the presentation; the pervasive and unavoidable stench a heady reminder of the decay, death and destruction left across the landscape of her homeland.

In her performance the unprocessed bones are a potent symbol of unresolved feelings and shallowly buried emotions. She draws attention to the abject in removing the evidence of the extant body. Bones themselves have a clarity and finality, but the clinging tags of flesh and gristle are discomfiting as they remind us of the freshness of the death. The cleaning action too is itself disruptive, but it is an action that she has used in a number of earlier works including *Cleaning the Mirror I* (1995). However, for *Cleaning the Mirror II* she used a human skeleton, probably a cast, and certainly not one that had recently belonged to a living being.

In cleaning the bones, she works to preserve them – to help them to dry out. In doing so she acknowledges, assimilates and gives value to the past; even a painful and, in parts, horrific past. In an interview with Chrissie Iles, Abramović talked about the bones and how their symbolism and meaning is totally dependent on the context in which they are presented. She notes that in Tibet and India bones have a very positive and spiritual aspect; however, when they are translated to a European context, bones are the site of shame and taboo. Abramović says she is ‘trying to question’ this and ‘push it beyond the history of one country’ (Iles, 1996: 21). However, this is a difficult task for a Western audience largely fearful of death, that ultimate loss of control. Whereas in other cultures, particularly those to which Abramović refers in her work, death is embraced as part of the continuing cycle of life, the bones a symbol of transition. On both a personal and political level, by including images of her parents after listening to their testimony, Abramović reclaims something of her personal history. And by setting herself the task of cleaning bones, she confronts the recent history of the Balkans. This part of the performance seems to simultaneously accept loss symbolized here by her direct contact with bones, while her determination to deal with the bones and make them ‘clean’, reveals that in spirit she remains undefeated; she has not submitted and is thus ‘victorious’. Within the context of the recent Balkans conflict this ‘victory in defeat’ can be seen as a political declaration to continue, and the performance a covert political statement which had a particular resonance with her audience who at this time were no doubt acutely aware of the atrocities of this war. This example of Abramović’s work also demonstrates that, although much of her work appears to be concerned with achieving a personal efficacy, she is clearly able to communicate in a politically efficacious way too.

THE HOUSE WITH THE OCEAN VIEW (2002)

Disarming in its simplicity, *The House with the Ocean View* (2002) was a performance in which Abramović spent 12 days without food, books or other escapist distractions on three small raised platforms attached to a wall of the Sean Kelly Gallery, New York. The tripartite form echoed a medieval triptych but the events depicted could hardly have been more different. Ladders with knives for rungs led down from each of the three spaces and throughout her time in the space Abramović carried out a series of repetitive and ritualized actions; dressing and undressing, washing, urinating, sitting, standing, lying down and occasionally singing but not speaking.

Moreover, the control exhibited in her actions was mirrored by the gallery audience watching, who, for the vast majority of the time, watched and waited without overly intrusive or disruptive actions of their own; the knives perhaps contributing to an air of respectful distance. Simple eye contact with selected individuals was the point of connection between the deliberate and controlled world she inhabited and the world of the passing, frequently pausing observers below her. The work, according to Abramović was, ‘as much about you as it is me’ (Abramović *et al.*, 2004: 158), making it clear that to encourage interactivity with her audience was a core part of her intention. She achieved this by deeply purist means – by generating ‘energy’.

CREATING AN ENERGY FIELD

In the energy sense, performing is like publishing. If you put an article in a newspaper, you concentrate an enormous amount of mental energy into it, if you invite people to come to a performance, practically you do the same ... during the performance you exchange your energy with the energy of the audience and together the artist and the audience are all subject to the same idea.

(Abramović *et al.*, 1998: 407)

In this piece Abramović put the process described above into action so that the energies of spectator and performer resonated ideas in such a way that change was effected in both the public and the performer. This method of conveying a message would appear to be an ephemeral rather than empirical means of effecting change but it is a methodology that Abramović has consistently subscribed to and one that is discussed further in Chapter 2. The entire premise of the performance is to ask the questions: ‘Can I

change my energy field? Can this energy field change the energy field of the audience and the space?' (Abramović *et al.*, 2004: 7). The apparent simplicity of such questions belies the complexity of the performance and its execution. 'Energy' on one level appears as a primary question relevant to a performance-related enquiry, while on another level this can be seen as a scientific enquiry concerned with the physics of space that has the potential to blur disciplinary boundaries. What really happens in the space and how can we consider or indeed measure its productive and/or generative potential? For RoseLee Goldberg and Peggy Phelan, who both witnessed this performance and have recorded their reactions and those of others around them, there is agreement; something transformative does happen. Indeed, many seemed visibly affected by the simple profundity of the work (see Abramović *et al.*, 2004: 158 and 177–78).

TRANSFORMATION THROUGH PRESENCE

During a discussion with her brother Velimir in the late 1990s, Abramović declared that the classical model of the audience viewing a picture was finished and that, instead, the experience of the audience should be closer to what she experienced when she meet with a monk who had just come out of seclusion following a number of years spent in a cave. Abramović has described how she sat next to the newly liberated monk and, while they were unable to speak to each other because they did not have a shared language, she felt his presence alter her own physical and mental state. She encountered a feeling of great warmth in spite of the cold, and this was followed by an experience of great clarity where she 'just stopped thinking' (Abramović *et al.*, 1998: 404). It is this deep sense of peaceful connectivity that Abramović sees as something art should strive for; inner power transferred from artist to spectator (Carr, 2002: 57). This represents a shift in emphasis from her early solo works with their edgy, subsumed, self-directed violence, and even from the collaborative works with Ulay where their involvement with each other limited spectator access to any form of connection or exchange.

PROCESSING TRAUMA

The ramifications of that fateful day extended even into Marina's proposal for the new performance being prepared for the gallery.

(Abramović *et al.*, 2004: 5)

The House with the Ocean View was in part made 'to provide a place of contemplation for the aftermath of the disaster and the dramatic change it had wrought in the psyche of a wounded New York City' (Abramović *et al.*, 2004: 158) The fact that Abramović decided to present a ritualistic performance partly in response to the events that occurred in the United States on and after 11 September 2001 adds an additional index to the work. At its root, the performance became a space in and through which the performance and spectator could project themselves and their present preoccupations. Moreover, as an expression of system and order within a cultural climate of uncertainty, the piece also had a particular resonance with something Mary Douglas wrote in her influential book *Purity and Danger*:

Order implies restriction; from all possible materials, a limited selection has been made and from all possible relations a limited set has been used. So disorder by implication is unlimited, no pattern has been realised in it, but its potential for patterning is indefinite. This is why, though we seek to create order, we do not simply condemn disorder. We recognise that it is destructive to existing patterns; also that it has potentiality. It symbolises both danger and power.

(1966 reprinted 2004: 117)

Abramović, in this performance, staged herself in anticipation that others would 'join' her in her extended, slowly moving meditation. The simplicity and orderliness of the means of performance perhaps offered the spectator time to discern what is essential and what is superfluous in our own lives. The space within the gallery provided a haven from the complexities and complications of the rest of the world. Its emphasis on creating a basic connection with spectators was a way of giving her audience a unique experience that, in an unexpected way, both relied on and was all about them and the 'disorder' and 'potentiality' they brought; here lay the piece's 'danger and power'. Indeed, for much of the performance Abramović just stood making eye contact with individuals who had come to share time and space in the gallery (Figure 3.6). Some visitors returned repeatedly, almost religiously, to witness her state of being at various times over the 12 days. As RoseLee Goldberg reports:

One young woman mimicked Abramović's movements with the precision of an understudy. A man held up a small drawing he had made of her, tinted gold, as in an offering to a saint. Another man stood and stared, legs astride arms akimbo, at Abramović and she down at him, for a full quarter of an hour.

(Abramović *et al.*, 2004: 157)



Figure 3.6 *The House with the Ocean View*, 2002.

In essence, she used her energy and outward gaze to extend herself into the space. Spectators have written of their desire to engage in an exchange (largely through reciprocating her gaze) or of wanting to support her with their presence in the space – particularly as the days passed and Abramović’s physical condition altered visibly to regular visitors.

And she hid nothing, allowing observers access to her entire repetitive routine; she left herself open and exposed with all the intimacy and discomfort this sort of exhibition of herself implied. A telescope installed at the back of the spectator space allowed anybody to minutely examine every inch of her body and the performance space. But, as a counter to this invitation to look so closely, was an awareness that others in the space could observe the telescopic-looker looking. The other notable object in the *mise en scène* was a metronome that Abramović periodically set in

motion. Its repetitive rhythm marked the passing of time and emphasized the cyclic nature of her activities during the 12 days. It also recalls one of Man Ray's early works *Indestructible Object* (first made as *Object of Destruction* 1923 remade 1965 as *Indestructible Object*) which consisted of a metronome with a photo of an eye attached to the moving arm. Man Ray used the metronome to regulate the rate at which he painted:

The faster it went, the faster I painted; and if the metronome stopped then I knew I had painted too long, I was repeating myself ... I also clipped a photo of an eye to the metronome's swinging arm to create the illusion of being watched as I painted.

(Montagu, 2002: 47)

In similar fashion, the metronome provided an audible regulation of the pace of Abramović's performance as spectators looked on.

Throughout the 12 days the performance was continuously recorded, both as a form of documentation and of authentication. Even while the gallery was closed, the video camera continued to act as a silent witness watching and recording her performance. Her daily visitors brought the unexpected and the spontaneous to the performance; without their constant but dynamic presence the performance may have been reduced to little more than a ritual exercise. Without these people to take up the offer extended by Abramović's performance, the piece would have had much less to say. This reinforces the important role Abramović increasingly gives the spectator in her work.

Certain esoteric practices of Buddhism are, once again, an important source of inspiration for this work. Thomas McEvelley, a long-time friend of and commentator on Abramović's work, has described the piece as 'a meditation retreat made public' (Abramović *et al.*, 2004: 168). He goes on to clarify this allusion:

Specifically, it seems to have been based on what in the Pali tradition of Theravadin Buddhism is called a vipassana retreat. These retreats (which are given here and there around the world) usually last 10–12 days (Abramović chose 12), with no talking, reading or writing, and very limited eating; one can fast, as Abramović chose to do, or eat one meal at about noon every day ... the Buddha says that the primary point is to remain carefully aware of four postures: walking, standing, sitting and lying down. Abramović's posted rules for her publicly performed retreat adhered to this formula.

(Abramović *et al.*, 2004: 168)

Its originality and significance lies in bringing this performance to a New York gallery. As noted earlier in this book, Abramović's wish to bring ideas from the East to the West or rather to Western audiences has been evident. Indeed, she once stated:

We wanted to get to know the whole background of the primitive cultures, integrating into them and then trying to transform and bring this experience to our work, so as to form a bridge between East and West.

(Abramović *et al.*, 1998: 19)

She did this as a person born and raised in the former Yugoslavia – a country which itself acted as a conduit between Eastern European ideas and powers and Western capitalist ones.

Fasting was undertaken both to purify and to alter her usual energy levels so that she could gain the attention of the public; a public who, through the process of the performance, evolved into a temporary community of interested and/or concerned audience members. But the fact that Abramović fasted throughout the piece's duration is not the centrepiece of the work, rather it is part of her performance process – a means by which she 'travels'. As a co-requisite action it is a core part of her process but it is not the point of her 'journey'. For it is Abramović's customary practice to undertake regular periods of fasting in order to release the body from the tyranny of digestion that diverts the body's energies. By ceasing to eat, the energy usually expended on routine food processing 'rises' and can be utilized in alternative ways. For Abramović, the key is to tap into this energy for creative purposes. In this way the fasting is a means to an end, not the end itself. Abramović, moreover, does not fail to acknowledge that for the first days of the fast there is discomfort, even pain, as the restricted body rebels against the imposed regime. But, in pushing through this, Abramović temporarily re-educates her system. This sort of preparatory practice is a typical feature of workshops Abramović has run for student groups as well as for practitioners. During these workshops Abramović expects participants to abide by a strict series of rules and restrictions which might include five to seven days of no eating, speaking, smoking or alcohol, and a rigorous set of practical exercises (see Chapter 4).

The connection Abramović desired with the audience was not always so easy to achieve. The gallery space itself engenders a certain deferential distance but, more than that, her elevated position creates an immediate

gulf – she is not on our level. Above us, in this white space she became a kind of exemplar of purity, simplicity and complete openness that could not be matched by anyone present. Furthermore, the durational aspect of the piece enhances a sense of being in the presence of something or someone sacred. The relative stillness, meditative quality and extended duration also evoked the earlier performance *Nightsea Crossing* (1981–86).

On reflecting on the proxemics of the performance, Abramović has spoken of wishing to revise the staging to remove these barriers to allow for even greater proximity and access for spectators/participants.

I'll have another platform on the other side for the public, who'll also be elevated. Anyone who wants to participate in this performance will have to make this effort to step up, to be on the same level. I'd like it to be harder, to put the public in similar conditions to mine – not for twelve days, because it's dangerous for many different reasons – but maybe the public wouldn't eat for one or two days, so that we'd have similar conditions for receiving energy.

(Heathfield, 2004: 147)

How this would work in practice is perhaps harder to imagine, but Abramović is certainly no stranger to intimate and prolonged interaction in performance as the previous discussion of her work in this chapter testifies. At core the performance *The House with the Ocean View* spoke of the value of human perseverance, of the potential simplicity of existence and of the necessity of extraordinary acts, if only to remind us that there are more ways to live than our customary Western commodity-driven understanding generally allows us to experience and that an appreciation of this fact may allow us greater insight into and subsequent tolerance of and respect for cultures and societies that choose to live differently.

PRACTICAL EXPLORATIONS AND THEIR ORIGINS

Marina Abramović has been teaching using extended workshops since 1979 when she first ran a workshop with Ulay in the Blue Mountains, New South Wales, Australia (Abramović *et al.*, 2003: 19). Since that time, Abramović has been keen to pass her techniques and approach to making to students and emerging artists all over the world. This section will focus on some of her creative practices and how these techniques relate to her overall performance philosophy.

Abramović's rituals of purification and preparation draw directly on a holistic approach to making; this is what Abramović terms 'cleaning the house'. According to Abramović, it is only through the thorough preparation of the mind and body that we can be truly receptive and responsive to the flows of energy necessary for the creative process. So, unlike teachers who may teach one class every week over a series of weeks, Abramović prefers short, intense periods of study using a workshop set-up.

During these workshops, which typically last from five to seven days and have in the past run twice a year (in early spring and early winter), Abramović requires total commitment from her students. A natural setting in a remote location is nearly always chosen and for the duration of the workshop all students are expected to abstain from food, talking, smoking, alcohol, drugs and sexual activity. Furthermore, students are required to sign an agreement that reflects their commitment to the

workshop and its conditions; Abramović is the only person authorized to determine whether a student may leave the workshop.

This chapter will outline, contextualize and discuss some of the exercises and techniques employed during these workshops. It will examine the ideas and philosophy behind Abramović's choice of exercises and how this relates to the key elements important to her own work and working practices. This section will be divided loosely into three parts as detailed below, although there are inevitable overlaps.

Body Conditioning. This section will include repetition and endurance exercises designed to strengthen and prepare the body mentally and physically. A number of Abramović's exercises focus on emptying the mind, which links to the tradition of **vipassana** meditation and the orthodox idea of kenosis (to empty out), while others push the body to physical and emotional extremes. These exercises include those that move the performer through space, as well as exercises that the performer undertakes almost statically.

Sensory Awareness and Receptivity. The exercises referred to in this section aim to heighten the performer's awareness of and reception to sensations received from internal and external stimuli. These exercises provide a means of tapping into alternative frames of perception that may be used to enhance the development of an individual's own creative process.

Memory and Re-remembering is composed of exercises designed to focus the performer and allow them to draw on their own histories as a means of informing their practice.

Where appropriate, I have included some examples from my own experiences working with students. It should be noted, however, that these experiments were necessarily limited; they were undertaken as part of a module on a drama studies honours degree programme.

WORKSHOP

One of the sources of inspiration for her workshops Abramović attributes to the Italian Renaissance writer of *The Craftsman's Art*, Cennino Cennini:

Cennini said that if you get a big assignment from the Pope or the king to design the cupola of a church or a castle, three months before you must stop eating, two months before you have to stop drinking wine, one month before you have to stop sexual intercourse, three weeks before you have to put your right hand in a plaster cast, completely motionless and the day you start you have to break the plaster; you take a pen and you can make perfect circles.

(Abramović *et al.*, 1998: 49)

Each workshop has a maximum of 25 participants. Each person is asked to bring the following items: a sleeping bag, a pair of heavy walking shoes or boots, a pair of trainers or light shoes and clothes that are utilitarian – dark blue overalls are suggested so that participants can wear their ordinary clothes underneath. The only personal items allowed are: one bar of unperfumed soap and one bottle of almond oil. Men may take razors but make-up and perfume are forbidden to anyone.

Participants fast for the duration of the workshop but are asked to consume at least two litres of liquids each day in the form of water and herbal teas. No one knows what will be asked of them in terms of exercises until the activity is about to happen, so there is no chance to plan or pre-empt an exercise. Exercises vary from light playful body movements to rigorous and demanding durational activities that last for most of the day. Each exercise works with a different part or system of the body so that the participant is attuned to her own capabilities and limits. The exercises are designed to enhance the participants' creativity but are also part of developing a physicality that will be resilient in life as well as art. The extended preparation of these exercises allows participants to cleanse and 'empty' themselves before they can use their energy in the most productive and creative manner.

The other items that Abramović specifies as necessary for the workshop are: one booklet of 24 carat gold leaf, 33 black peppercorns, 100 grams of unpeeled almonds, a small amount of honey and 21 coriander seeds. These materials are used to create gold balls that will be consumed as a ritual meal towards the end of the workshop. This action echoes the ritual meal Ulay and Abramović consumed on their birthday (30 November) in 1978. For this meal they prepared a sandwich from brown bread and butter, salami and garlic. The entire sandwich was then covered in gold leaf and cut in half so that Ulay and Abramović could eat half each. The recipe for the gold balls, however, is an ancient one originating from sixth century India and it was given to Abramović by the house of Harish Jahani (Abramović in Pijnappel, 1995: n.p.). It is believed that eating such a ball after a period of fasting will assist the faster in obtaining a clear state of mind. The workshop, with its very particular conditions, will teach its participants the following: endurance, concentration, perception, self-control and will-power, as well as encouraging the participant to confront mental and physical limits.

LOCATION

The place for a workshop must be chosen carefully: the building must be basic but comfortable with heating, hot water and bedrooms for participants. Ideally, the location of the building should be somewhere relatively isolated; a large stretch of open countryside is ideal. All electronic and media distractions must be left behind or handed in on arrival including things like mobile phones and iPods. By choosing to work in a rural and spacious location, participants have plenty of room to carry out the workshop exercises and are less likely to encounter many people from outside the group who could take their attention elsewhere.

It is, however, possible to carry out shorter workshops to accommodate the differing needs of individuals who want to explore aspects of these working practices but cannot spend an extended period doing so. For instance, in 1995 Abramović ran a 24-hour workshop in Amsterdam. In contrast to the usual setting, this workshop took place in an urban setting. This reduced the number of individuals who could participate but at least allowed participants to gain some insight into what Abramović's techniques have to offer. As you read the following exercises, it is hoped that you too will gain some understanding and may be inspired to experiment yourself.

CONDITIONS OF PARTICIPATION

All participants are expected to abide by the conditions and rules that are set for the workshops. This is because of the importance that the use of restriction has in relation to the practices undertaken. In limiting the amount and type of options available, physiological and consequently psychological thought processes can be altered so that participants may be free to think differently.

EXERCISES

The exercises for her workshops are a set range of activities that are detailed in Abramović's book *Unfinished Business* (1999) and also in *The Student Body* (2003). Abramović is also in the process of producing her own inexpensive book for students detailing her exercises. Abramović has given permission for seven of her exercises to be reproduced in this book. Her words are written in italics as a set of

prescriptive instructions. It is hoped that with the accompanying notes you can make your own discoveries and connections. By referring to parts of Chapter 2 you will gain further insight into the nature and purpose of these exercises. The important thing to remember is that these exercises are not intended to develop a particular performance style or method of making performance work, but are designed to attune or re-attune you to your own creative energies and ideas.

BODY CONDITIONING

MEDITATION

In meditation, the focus is on being in the moment and not ‘doing’. Through the process of emptying the mind, a sense of space evolves, which results in a feeling of great freedom. In achieving this condition of ‘choiceless awareness’ the meditator gains great insight and understanding of life. In essence, such meditation aims to connect you with a different state of consciousness that allows you to perceive the world around you in fresh terms. Ideally, it allows you to experience a version of yourself that is better than your everyday self (see Kim *et al.*, 2008: 50).

All the following exercises should be carried out in silence, unless otherwise stated.

Try this seated meditation, which was set for Abramović when she stayed at the Tushita monastery, Dharamsala, India in 1987.

Before you begin make sure that you are warm enough.

Wrap yourself in a blanket, a duvet or sleeping bag if you think you will be cold – this is particularly important if you are fasting because your body will not be able to generate as much heat as usual and you are likely to feel the cold more acutely.

Think about how you will sit so that your body is reasonably comfortable, relaxed and supported by the upright chair you are sitting in.

- 1 *Sitting on a chair facing one of the primary colours yellow, blue or red. Motionless. 1 hour each.*

With the single focus placed ahead of you, allow the distractions of your everyday existence to fade into the background.

Allow yourself to be absorbed in this one activity. Allow your eyes to relax their focus

Although thoughts will enter and depart – particularly when you begin this activity, you should just let this happen without worrying – just let it all go.

Embrace the colour and let the colour embrace you.

You might be surprised at what you see.

This exercise is one of a number Abramović has introduced into her workshops that ask you to be still and quiet for fixed periods of time. Like the previous meditation exercise, Abramović was introduced to this colour exercise in the Tushita monastery. In this instance, one hour is stipulated for each of the three colours; however, in the monastery Abramović was given the exercise for seven hours (Pijnappel, 1995: n.p.). There is a cumulative effect generated by carrying out the exercise with each of the three colours in a single session – although when I have done it I have allowed myself a few minutes' break between each new colour. For other exercises you might remain focused on a single object or colour for as much as seven hours. In order to do this you must arrange conditions to ensure that you are not interrupted. You also have to be willing to be open to whatever happens.

EXPERIENCING THE OUTSIDE OF YOUR HOUSE

This next exercise affects a shock to the body of every participant as the combined stimulus of an early morning outside start and nakedness forces you out of your comfort zone to embrace, full on, whatever the outside world has brought.

- 2 The early morning, between 6 and 7, naked, regardless to weather conditions, outside on the earth, stepping on the ground and checking the body (30 minutes). With eyes closed, wait for the call, jump and use the entire energy of the body, lifting both legs at the same time, jump as high as possible and at the same time release a scream (repeat three times).*

Once you have got over the initial embarrassment of suddenly appearing naked in the outdoors (if indeed such an action does produce feelings of embarrassment in you), make a mental note of what is happening to you as you move around and experience your first taste of the morning, the environment and its impact on you. After half an hour whoever

is leading the exercise will give you a signal to continue with the second part of the exercise – after all you will not be wearing a wristwatch. In the chosen space re-focus your attention on the group so that you can carry out the final part of the exercise (as written above). The catharsis of the final scream will almost certainly leave you feeling exhilarated, if perhaps a little cold if the weather is inclement. The exercise should also help to break down any inhibitions you or the group may have had.

If, however, you feel very strongly that you do not wish to carry out the exercise completely nude, then you can, of course, set your own limits or build up to complete nudity by carrying out the exercise on a number of occasions. Do not, however, take clothes off during the exercise as this is likely to prove distracting to other members of the group and is not the purpose of the exercise. Try, at all times, to push yourself beyond what you automatically feel comfortable with so that however you carry out the exercise it is a stretch for you. The later part of this exercise, that is the jump and scream, were tasks set for Abramović at the Tushita monastery and, like a number of these practices, the shock and release to the body's systems are there to allow for an 'emptying out'. The raw sensation, for instance, experienced when one submerges the body in a freshwater stream (another natural environment Abramović likes to use), brings one directly into the here and now.

JUST BREATHE

A number of Abramović's exercises concentrate on the breath and sound. The pattern of your breathing will affect your body and its energy levels, so by concentrating on your breath and then adding a sound to it you may both increase your level of energy and add energy to the environment around you through your vibrations.

You can stand or sit to try this exercise. If you choose to sit, make sure that the upper body is upright and that your torso feels open and free.

Breath through your nose and feel the breath reaching down into the abdomen and your upper body gently rising – but do not force it to do so.

Exhale gently through the mouth through soft lips.

Repeat until you feel comfortable, relaxed and more alert.

Now add a hum to the exhaled breath – start gently and continue to be aware of how the body is responding. Take your time and do not rush this transition.

Once your hum is established, open it out to an ‘arrrr’.

Repeat this for a time; not necessarily increasing the volume of the sound you are making but remaining concentrated on your breath.

Now repeat this short sequence of vowels on a single breath. The syllables are not as important as the pattern they create in your breathing.

AH – AA – EE – AWE – OO – AH – AA – EE – AWE – OO etc.

The length of the sound pattern is deliberate but the sounds chosen do not ‘mean’ anything. This has been done so that you are free to experiment with this exercise without feeling that the chanted sounds are affiliated with any particular religious or spiritual practice. You can substitute your own words or chant if you prefer. Practice, so that each time you repeat the exercise you do so for a longer period of time.

Start with half an hour, then try an hour. You can then increase this incrementally as you wish.

Note what this does to your breathing, your body and your concentration.

MAKING THE ORDINARY EXTRAORDINARY

A number of exercises undertaken during the workshop require extended concentration on everyday tasks that we normally take for granted. By changing the speed at which activities are carried out; that is undertaking daily tasks in extreme slow motion, our attention is drawn to exactly how our bodies function in space. Each muscle group is forced to bear weight in different ways and for longer periods of time. We have to consciously re-calibrate our system to slow our internal speed down. The change in pace required of us pushes us to focus on the minutiae of our existence and common ritual tasks associated with daily life. This in turn builds an awareness of, and strengthens our sense of connectedness to, our bodies. It also allows for an in-the-moment experience of ourselves, because all our focus and concentration is upon ‘right now’.

You can, of course, also experiment with this idea outside the workshop conditions; you could try a slow motion meal or fight, you could change the order of your usual daily tasks while still maintaining the slow pace; try dressing before you sleep before you wash before you undress before you drink tea, etc. While these are departures from Abramović's stipulations, the idea is that you start with the original and find your own creativity. After all, no two participants of Abramović's workshops are ever going to come up with the same work even after undergoing the same workshop exercises.

3 *Walk around the lake twelve times. Nine hours.*

This exercise is a test of endurance. Nine hours is a long time to be walking, even when you are well-fed, but without food you will really be pushing your body mentally and physically. As it is implied that you are to use a circular route, make sure that there is a designated water stop so that you know that you can get a drink at regular intervals. This is particularly important if the weather is hot. Suitable clothing and shoes are also important. Clearly, not every group carrying out an activity like this will have a lake to circumnavigate so you are likely to have to measure out a suitable route if there is not a lake or similar in the vicinity. Preferably, map out a route that can be covered a good number of times as this repetition is important to the exercise. After all, Abramović could have simply said walk for nine hours, which would have produced very different results than having a group of people all follow the same route a number of times. It is because of this that you should consider how you react to/negotiate other group members who are walking slower or faster than you. Do you compete to keep up or surpass other members of the group or do you set your own pace and keep to it? Do you change from one strategy to another? What do you think your choices reveal about yourself and your way of operating in the world? What sort of mental journey do you take as you continue to walk? How do your feelings alter as the hours pass and you complete more and more of the circuits? What strategies do you adopt to keep yourself going?

You can start with any object and create an energy field around it again and again through ritual ... because repetition of the same thing over and over again generates enormous power. Old cultures know this. That's why they base their entire ritual structure on repetition.

(Abramović *et al.*, 1998: 20)

There is another variation on this exercise that asks that you travel only once around the lake or circular route. However, this version asks you to do so blindfolded. This use of a blindfold to enhance sensitivity is something that is explored in the following exercise.

SENSORY AWARENESS AND RECEPTIVITY

In contrast to the multiple circuits required in the previous exercise, this exercise requires a detailed sensitivity to a landscape you will travel through, once on the outgoing journey and once on your return.

4 *Walk far from the house. Stop, blindfold yourself. Find the way back to the house.*

This task should not be undertaken without suitable supervision. Ideally, it should also be carried out in a remote location so that the risk of unexpected contact with non-group members is minimized. The person supervising should only intervene if the participant is likely to cause herself injury. If some intervention is required, every attempt should be made to assist without breaking the commitment to silence, by gently guiding the participant physically until they are no longer in danger. Once this is achieved, then the participant should be allowed to continue their journey back to the house without interference (providing they do not encounter further difficulties.) Without sight, you will be heavily reliant on your sense of smell, touch, sound and, possibly, taste. In the process of dealing with the demands of the exercise you are likely to create an alternative perceptive field and an internalized 'vision' of what you can no longer see.

You will not only have to try to remember which direction to take you will need to use your whole body to feel your way back through the landscape. What did the route smell of? Were there changes in temperature as you moved from a forested area to an open field? Although you are blindfolded you will still probably have some sense of degrees of light or dark, so this too will assist you to determine whether you are under cover or out in the open. What does the ground communicate? Is it wet and sticky underfoot or are you moving through fallen leaves? Are there any sounds that you can steer by? It makes sense to consider how many ways you can sense the space without your vision on your walk from the house in anticipation of your return journey. Your entire being needs to be sensitive to the surroundings to successfully undertake this exercise.

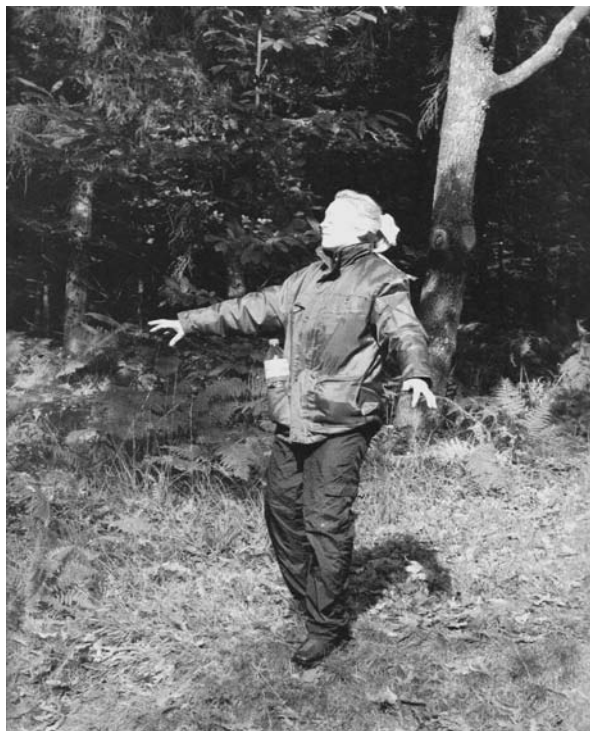


Figure 4.1 Blindfold exercise.

Such an experiment with sensory deprivation, enforced through a blindfold, is something that requires few resources but a good deal of commitment if it is to be carried out in a manner even approximating Abramović's disciplined durational approach. As Abramović points out:

I'm totally against all these short 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.
(Thompson and Weslien, 2006: 34)

You might want to try carrying out a similar task but under different physical conditions so that instead of being in an outside space you are in an unfamiliar indoor space. In addition, you might want to set a time

limit on a particular task because clearly in an indoor space there is no 'house' to return to. A number of students with whom I have worked have experimented with blindfolding themselves for extended periods of time. For most of these people their initial anxiety circulates around a concern about 'finding the time' in their busy schedules to undertake an extended experiment which requires them to 'do nothing', which is often their perception of this sort of activity. With the expectation of boredom they often worry about how hard it would be to be still, quiet and in darkness for the few hours they had earmarked for their experiment. In every case their experiences surprised no one so much as themselves. Indeed, with a recent group the time flew by so fast they immediately decided that a longer time period was necessary if they were to begin to give themselves over to the experience. These students decided on a further eight-hour period, during which the group would fast and remain silent. By Abramović's standards this time span is insignificant; however, for the students it represented a big commitment and a big step forward. They also, perhaps unwisely, decided they wanted to be in a busier place than the site of their earlier experiments. While the thoroughfare they chose to work in may have had some parallels with Ulay and Abramović's placement of *Nightsea Crossing* in a multitude of different locations with unpredictable publics in attendance, it also meant that there were many distractions that pulled their focus in a variety of directions. Nonetheless, they found that because of their earlier explorations they were able to reach a place of deep calm relatively simply. On this level, they knew what to expect and were able to make the most of a situation; the body relaxed while the mind remained in a heightened state of alertness. Indeed, one student described how

at first I tried to think of things to keep my mind occupied but after a while you can't ... you kind of let things go. Again my body shut down, but my mind – I found I could concentrate on different parts of the environment around me which was weird because I never thought I'd be able to do it.

(Brunel University undergraduate student, 2009)

She found she could tune in and out of sounds outside the space she was in with a specificity she would not have believed possible if she had not encountered this experience herself. This student later reiterated the importance of undergoing the experience for herself and being open

to the state of non-doing. In common with students I have worked with in previous years, they again found themselves wanting to extend the time period during which they engaged in the exercise. Some years ago, two particularly engaged students spent 24 hours in darkness on campus. For their final presentation, however, they chose to work blindfolded for a 12-hour period in a small marked zone of three to four metres square. They filled the space with broken glass and a chair. They then remained in the space from 11 p.m. until 11 a.m. when we came and viewed the work. We found the sightless pair locked in a warm embrace; a video recorder on a tripod the only witness to the previous 11 hours. The video documentation of their efforts mapped their slow uncomfortable journey through the limited space, but what they experienced on their private, internal journey was something they continued to value well after the module was completed.

THE POWER OF REPETITION

In Zen they say: If something is boring after two minutes, try it for four. If still boring, try it for eight, sixteen, thirty-two, and so on. Eventually one discovers that it is not boring at all but very interesting.

(Cage, 1939 reprinted 2006: 93)

Other exercises work by repeating an action for an extended period of time. In repeating an action or set of actions over and over again the activity takes on a life of its own. You will find your own rhythm once you let go of your concerns about the nature of the activity and the time frame. Abramović uses particular actions but this idea of repeating an action could be used in relation to any number of everyday actions that are taken for granted in the ordinary course of daily life but when repeated create specific energy relationships built through the repeated action. To sweep a floor once, for instance, has a useful practical purpose but to continue to do this for three hours transforms the activity into a kind of ritual. The focus shifts from the mundane to something that physically and mentally stretches the participant carrying out the sweeping. It also transforms the action itself. If I paint a room systematically from one wall to the next it may take me two hours to complete the four walls of the room. The first wall I painted is now dry, but instead of stopping I continue to paint, covering this wall and the next, until the room is painted a second time. Still, I continue, painting my first wall a third

time and so on and so on. My action takes on another function and speaks of something other than the desire simply to decorate a room.

ENERGY, BREATH AND CONSCIOUSNESS

A Mahāyāna Sūtra or a Ch’an text, the Zen Buddhist teacher Charles Luk writes,

should never be read in a hurry once or twice and then placed in the book-case like a novel or ordinary book. It should be read again and again ... until the reader understands its profound meaning ... The more he reads it the more he will comprehend its aim until he will forget the printed words and will confront only its deep meaning, which will loom before him to the exclusion of all else. He will notice his gradual embodiment of the doctrine taught in it, although he may be unprepared for the startling experience.

(McEvilley, 2002, 178–79)

The repetition becomes a process through which the knowledge implicit in the text becomes embodied. As Abramović has discovered, the repetition of sounds and words can shift your consciousness. Vocalizing particular words in the manner of a chant builds up energy and concentration through the breath. The repetition of a chant may be used to structure or effect physical and mental processes. In the Tushita monastery mentioned earlier, Abramović was set the task of repeating a chant continuously for many hours: ‘I had to repeat a phrase 6,000 times a day’ (Abramović *et al.*, 1998: 50). While at first she was resistant to what she saw as a meaningless repetition, over time she experienced a sense of harmony, an equilibrium in the body, as her entire breathing and thought became patterned by the shape of the chant. The repetition of a phrase many hundreds of times a day may allow the breath and, by extension, the body and mind to become calm, clear and oxygenated.

- 5 *Use a 30 cm diameter mirror. Hold the mirror in front of your face. Starting from the house, walk backwards, look constantly into the mirror to see the route behind you. Four hours each direction.*

This exercise works through disorientation. You not only are asked to walk backwards, which itself forces the body to function differently, but you are also asked to find your way with a smallish mirror which provides a limited view of the world behind you. Your system, under such

conditions, must re-educate itself to process and pass on the information it receives so that you can find your way safely. The amount of effort required to maintain this exercise for the requisite time is considerable but the rewards for committing to these demands will make your time and effort worth it. In literally changing the way you view the world and complicating your ability to orientate and navigate in this world, the world can be seen afresh. A number of student encounters with this task have stopped short of committing to the requisite four hours determined by Abramović. However, if you determine to undertake this activity for a shorter period I would suggest that you do it for at least two hours in order to allow the exercise to at least gain some momentum. Repeatedly, I have found that students wished that they had committed to the longer time period but found their 'pre-performance' nerves made them ambivalent about committing so much time to the activity.



Figure 4.2 Walking backwards with mirror.

In common with many of the workshop exercises, the durational aspect is there to allow you the space and time to fully engage with the process of the exercise, but is also there to test your endurance, perseverance and determination – all important qualities for any artist to have. Aside from the difficulties and frustrations you may feel undertaking this task, when you have completed it remember to record your insights (negative and positive), as well as any moments of serendipity. As with all these exercises, the period following the exercise is an important time of reflection. Do commit to writing your thoughts and experiences in a diary or notebook, even if at the time you judge these things to be of little significance.

MEMORY AND RE-MEMBERING

The sixth exercise also requires that you navigate an outside environment before returning to reflect on and describe what you have found. This exercise asks you to make personal choices based on smell. The process of choice asks you to draw on your own experience and associations with smells in a particular space; in this instance, a forest.

- 6 *Walk in the forest and choose three things whose smell you like and three things whose smell you don't like. Describe the smells.*

Smell is a powerful aid to memory. It connects directly with our systems, bypassing the rational or the intellectual. As such, smell elicits powerful emotions and reactions and, while it might be perfectly possible to choose things that you have never encountered before in the forest setting stipulated by Abramović, feelings of like or dislike are usually rooted in previous experiences of the same or similar smells. The smell of abject materials, for example, usually generates a reaction of disgust and dislike in most people because we have been acculturated to have this reaction and 'naturally' avoid/reject these materials. Other things discovered in the forest might have a smell that is associated with a particular set of circumstances in an individual's life.

In a class situation I have worked with students who chose to extend the basic premise of this exercise to make a durational piece. I describe it here to give you an idea of how the fundamentals of an exercise may be extended creatively. While, in a workshop situation, Abramović determines and is responsible for the exact conditions under which

participants work, if you want to work on your own experiments, there is nothing to stop you using the ideas as starting points for your own work.

For the investigation and performance presentation, four of my students worked together to make a group project. They used four adjoining sheets of tarpaulin that were set up to form a rectangle in a large performance space. On each of the four tarpaulins the students had placed a particular substance that was powerfully evocative for them. On the occasion of their performance they had chosen to use materials with which they had largely negative associations; large amounts of sand and liver are two of the substances I remember vividly. They had spent many hours (before the public were admitted) working with the materials and exposing their bodies to the substances. The materials used had very personal associations for the students and as a result they experienced strong visceral reactions. The sense of tension and suppressed emotion was palpable when the audience were allowed to enter and share the space where the work was created. On another occasion a group of students constructed objects out of foods and liquids, which they loved, hated or had an allergic reaction to. In navigating the structures they created, they also navigated their feelings of pleasure, aversion or fear. This second example demonstrates how the point of origin – the description of three smells that are liked and loathed – can lead in alternative directions depending on the interests and concerns of the students participating. While the students started with smells, this led them to thinking about foods associated with particular smells, which in turn led them to want to explore the food substances themselves.

7. *Over a period of one hour, write your name only once with your pen poised on a white piece of paper.*

This exercise sounds simple after the hours of stillness or prolonged movement that have featured in the earlier exercises. This task combines something of the concentration of the motionless meditation exercises used for emptying the mind with the discipline of slow motion movement. In asking you to write your name, rather than any word, it also asks you to think about yourself – who you are. Our signature is something that we are often asked to write to verify our identity, in banks, on official documents, as well as on things as mundane as cheques. We write the official version of our name on these occasions,



Figure 4.3 Student work.

rapidly, with little thought. To take a hour to write our name reminds us of the extraordinary action that writing is; these individual and particular marks on paper are created almost atomically as the speed of production is slowed to a point which makes the minute movement that is occurring look almost motionless. And again, how you approach the exercise is likely to reveal something about you. For instance, do you calculate the number of letters in your name and then calculate how much time should be spent on each letter? Or is your approach much more open-ended and fluid? What other thoughts and decisions occur?

These are seven of the many exercises that feature in Abramović's workshops. After the days of 'cleansing' and 'emptying', participants are woken up in the middle of the night and asked to write down the first word that comes into their heads. This word is used as a starting point for making a performance; every participant works from this basis. Once the fasting is over, broken with a simple bowl of freshly cooked steamed rice eaten in silence, each person begins to work on their piece. Finally, when the pieces are made and shown the workshop ends with a party; a celebration of the participants' success in completing this demanding workshop.

I love the idea of recipes and instructions because they are very restrictive.

(Abramović with Celant, 2001: 23)

Abramović's approach is prescriptive and deliberately all-encompassing. The experience of a workshop is intense, exhausting and revealing. If you want to really explore her approach in its entirety then the best way to do this is to sign up for a course with her at her new performance centre, the Marina Abramović Foundation in Hudson, New York, which will be opening in the near future. A large disused Art Deco cinema is to be transformed to accommodate the Foundation, which will have a particular emphasis on duration work.

The exercises here are designed to give you a sense of possible starting points for working with the body under conditions that stretch your mental and physical limits. As such, they should not be undertaken lightly or without adequate supervision. Once you have undergone at least some of the processes characteristic of the workshop exercises described, you are encouraged to explore your own impulses; each participant will, in this way, gain their own unique knowledge from their experiences. These experiences are described by Abramović as 'liquid knowledge' (Allsop and DeLahunta, 1996: 18) because each experience is something that cannot necessarily be quantified or rationalized but is an embodied understanding that you will carry with you and that will inform your own practice.

YOUR OWN WORKSHOP

When planning your own workshop decide in advance exactly what you want the conditions of your workshop to be and make sure that everybody agrees and commits to these conditions. If possible have a single leader so that there can be no confusion and those undertaking the workshop can entirely devote themselves to the activities without having to concern themselves with the overall running of the workshop itself.

The value of error

I have found that mistakes are a very important facet of my work. Sometimes you can't do without doing things you strongly feel you have to do, even if you know already that they are really wrong. I think that's the sort of situation where you learn the most and that helps the development of your work the most.

(Abramović *et al.*, 2002: 143)

If things do not work out entirely as you anticipated in your workshop or in exercises, then take this as a positive rather than a negative thing;

the most remarkable things often occur through serendipity and could never have been planned or achieved if the unexpected had not occurred and changed the direction of things.

Something to consider

If you could choose a piece of performance art/live art to re-enact, what would it be? What is it about this piece of work that draws you to it? Assuming you gained the permission of the artist who originated the work, what changes (if any) would you make to the piece to re-animate it for a contemporary context/audience? Can you offer reasons for your decisions?

The ideal state of performance

When I perform, the most important thing is that half of my brain is in complete control and other part of the brain is completely loose.

(Maria Callas quoted in Abramović *et al.*, 2002: 143)

Think about how you will record your experiments/explorations

But right from the beginning, I had inherited an attitude from my mother: she was really fanatical about collecting and filing everything. So I was always thinking that there has to be some documents. I was very aware of the historical important of documentation.

(Abramović *et al.*, 2007: 16)

Artists for hire

I have this whole idea, apart from the members continuing their own work, to experiment with establishing a model of service where performers can be rented to perform. This may work within the context of some of the artists' practice, because so many artists actually don't perform themselves, and they need a performer to do it. And they often have trouble finding someone who can really do it with the right discipline. So I have thirty five people from twenty two different countries who can do anything you want because they're really trained. So you want someone short or small, somebody blonde, and you can audition the performance artist like you can audition the actors. For me, this kind of income is much better than working in a bar or a factory to survive.

(Abramović *et al.*, 2007: 26)

GLOSSARY

Acconci, Vito (1940–) is a North American artist and writer who became notorious in the 1970s for his disturbing and confrontational performances that interrogated concepts of surveillance, subjectivity and sexuality. He bit himself in private and displayed the photos he took of himself and the ink prints he made as *Trademarks* (1970). He continuously followed random people on the street until they entered a space where he could no longer follow them in *Following Piece* (1969). He is probably best known for his *Seedbed* (1972) performance, discussed in Chapter 1. Acconci now works as a writer and makes architectural sculptures like *Mur Island* (2003) created in Graz, Austria.

Art Informel emerged in the post-Second World War period. Following the liberation of Europe from wartime occupation, this new form provided a much freer form of expression after the suppression experienced during the war years. The centre of Art Informel was Paris. It was the French art critic Michel Tapié who spoke of the importance of putting aside classical tradition and taking up the risk and revolutionary challenge offered by the art and actions of Dadaism and Surrealism. By the 1950s, the Informel approach to art-making existed throughout Western Europe and also in Czechoslovakia and Poland, while freedom of expression was relatively unencumbered. Art Informel advocated a gestural

approach to painting that manifested itself in Abstract Expressionism in the United States. The approach prioritizes process over product.

Baader-Meinhof Group (also known as the Red Army Faction (RAF)) The original left-wing militant activists, led by Andreas Baader and later inadvertently joined by public intellectual Ulrike Meinhof (who helped Baader escape from custody in 1970). The group were responsible for a number of terrorist actions during the 1960s and 1970s that they claimed were undertaken in order to shake up what they understood to be the shortcomings of liberal democracy. While other groups during the incendiary 1968 period had discussed revolution, the RAF determined to take direct action to flush out what they saw as the fascistic militarism that underpinned modern German politics and society.

While the early actions of Baader and his girlfriend Gudrun Ensslin included placing bombs in the Kaufhaus Schneider department store in Frankfurt so that they went off outside opening hours and did not result in human casualty; later bungled actions caused more than the destruction of property and included deaths. All those involved at this time were imprisoned or had been killed by the late 1970s. But because their politics resonated with many young Germans at this time who were eager to distance themselves from the generation and politics that had led to atrocities of the Second World War, they were unusually popular for a terrorist organization. Furthermore, there was a certain additional appeal in the large female membership and the sexy leather-clad leader, Andreas Baader. All first-generation members of the organization had died by 1977, but this did not stop a second wave of new members from carrying out further actions in the 1980s, which in turn resulted in lengthy prison sentences.

Considerable controversy has surrounded the circumstances of the deaths of the original imprisoned members. Held in the Stuttgart–Stammheim prison for several years, Holger Meins died in 1974 after going on hunger strike whereas other members committed suicide by hanging themselves. During ‘Death Night’ (1977) Baader, Ensslin and Jan-Carl Raspe all apparently shot themselves; a remarkable achievement considering that Stuttgart–Stammheim was notorious for being a high-security prison where guns for prisoners were presumably forbidden. Irmgard Möller was the only

member of the original group to survive the 'Death Night' and she was released in 1994 due to poor health. Second-generation members imprisoned in the 1980s have hardly fared better – spending more than 24 years behind bars. In spite of this, there continued to be actions that were claimed as belonging to third-, fourth- and even fifth-generation RAF members well into the 1990s when finally, in 1998, an official communiqué was received by Reuters stating that the RAF had disbanded.

Beuys, Joseph (1921–86) was a German artist and political activist who often used transitory substances in his work, such as wax, honey and fat, which produced very particular effects when they deteriorated, as well as drawing attention to the temporary nature of art and existence. He created works that often had complex symbolic associations that require the viewer to investigate further. His use of felt and fat in many of his works have very personal connotations and can be traced to his amazing survival following the crashing of his aircraft in Crimea during the Second World War. Tartars discovered him after the crash and, by covering his body in fat and wrapping him in felt, helped him to survive the incident.

Burden, Chris (1946–) is a North American artist who first made his name by setting up and carrying out a number of conceptual performances that placed the body in situations of danger, pain or risk. One performance, *220* (1971), used water, electricity and ladders; *Five Day Locker Piece* (1971) placed him in a severely constricted space for five days and *Through the Night Softly* (1973) had him dragging his body, arms tied behind his back, over shards of glass. One of the most notorious of his works was *Shoot* (1971) where he got a friend who was a marksman to shoot him in the arm in the F Space, a Californian art gallery. This performance, like many Burden undertook, deliberately blurred the line between reality and art. Indeed, his *Deadman* (1972) piece, in which he lay at the roadside covered with a tarpaulin, gave so little indication of its status as art performance that it was interpreted by the police as a thoughtless prank. His work today focuses on installations, architectural, mechanical and sculptural works that do not centre on the body or risk; consequently, his work today is far less controversial than it was in the 1970s.

Disciplinary power – Michel Foucault in *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison* (1991) argues that the subject is formed through

the body and its relationships with power. The subject becomes ‘an effect of power’ that results from its submission to and interaction with the disciplinary regimes instituted by the family, schools, hospitals, asylums and the army. The routines and habituated ways of functioning condoned by these institutions constantly inscribe and reinforce certain gestures, behaviours and ways of using the body that render the body ‘docile’, and through docility the subject becomes efficient and productive.

Export, Valie (1940–) is an Austrian feminist artist and filmmaker. Export was first associated with the Viennese Aktionists, who influenced her outlook on art. After working with Peter Weibel in 1966 she became involved in founding the Austrian Filmmakers Cooperative in 1968. Like Abramović, Export was a pioneer in the arena of body-based performance art, exploiting her body as a bearer of particular gendered meanings in order to challenge established constructions of sexuality and female representation. One performance, *Touch Cinema* (1968) involved her placement of a box over her exposed breasts. Through holes in the box, spectators could touch her breasts. Today, she works in a variety of media; installation, film and photography. She has written important articles on art theory and history: *The Real and Its Double: The Body* (1988) and *Aspects of Feminist Actionism* (1979).

Fluxus is an international art movement that emerged in the early 1960s which staged numerous events, somewhat in the tradition of Dadaism and Surrealism, challenging conventional notions of art and art-making. Fluxus, meaning flow or purge in Latin, was not interested in promoting the artist as an elite, inspired professional maker of marketable objects, but rather it wanted artists and art to have a social function and a collective spirit that should revolutionize the way art was produced. George Maciunas, who wrote the Fluxus manifesto in 1963, is considered the founding father, although he was less a leader than a chairman for the many artists who wanted to be involved. His gallery, publications and promotional skills were key to Fluxus’ emergence as an important new departure in art and performance. Other important proponents include George Brecht, John Cage, Yoko Ono, Dick Higgins, Alan Kaprow, Nam June Paik, Ben Vautier and La Monte Young, to name just a few of the many artists associated with Fluxus.

Halprin, Anna (1920–) an innovative choreographer who worked on an open platform in the mountains of Marin County, near San

Francisco. Halprin adopted an open and free approach to dance, encouraging dancers to follow their intuition and impulses in their movement. With her husband Lawrence she developed a highly influential system of working known as R.S.V.P. cycles.

Hierophany is the term used to refer to something sacred that shows itself (etymologically: *hiero-* sacred; *-phany* appearance/manifestation). The term was first used by Romanian anthropologist Mircea Eliade in his highly influential book *The Sacred and the Profane: The Nature of Religion* (1959).

Kaprow, Allan (1927–2006) first used the term ‘Happenings’ to describe performative or art events that occurred in the 1960s and 1970s. Happenings appeared spontaneous because of the absence of any of the usual framing devices associated with music, theatre and dance, but were actually carefully conceptualized pieces of ‘lifelike art’. Kaprow, in an attempt to democratize art, wanted to make works that anybody could be involved with, as well as demonstrate that art was really a part of everyday life and living and, consequently, that everyday movement and actions could be used in such works.

Palestine, Charlesmagne (1945–) is a North American composer, pianist and video artist. Palestine became known through his distinctive compositional and playing style in the late 1960s. His solo piano pieces are based on a sort of reductive repetition that builds resonance in the instrument; an effect that cannot be captured in the recordings that exist of his work. In 1971 he collaborated with the Judson choreographer Simone Forti (a protégé of Yvonne Rainer) although he is probably best known for his short (25–30-minute) piano performances, during which his repeated hammering of the keys would sometimes leave his hands bleeding.

Pane, Gina (1939–90) was a French artist born of Italian parents. In the 1970s she was considered one of the most radical artists in Europe. The ‘actions’ she carried out used her body in ways that pushed her physical and psychological limits; *Escalade non Anaesthesiée* (1971) involved her walking up and down a specially made ladder-like frame with rungs made of sharp metal that cut her hands and feet. In *Death Control* (1977) live maggots crawled over her face and under her eyelids, while as part of *Azione Sentimentale* (1973) she used a razor blade to make incisions in her forearm in which she inserted rose thorns. Much of her work articulated a

protest against the Vietnam war as well as the many injustices she saw around her. She died of cancer in 1990.

Psychic shattering is a term used by Leo Bersani in his book *The Freudian Body* (1986) to describe the process by which Bersani believed human sexuality is constituted. 'Psychic shattering' occurs when the combined forces of pain and restraint result in the subject being 'split', that is, there is an opening up or play between what we understand to be the usual sense of a secured subjectivity and the loss or fragmentation of that subjectivity. In this way the very structures and permanence of selfhood are called into question. The idea of 'psychic shattering' is an interesting one because of the way in which it indicates the impermanence, fragility and mutability of the concept of self and the way in which it may point to a transcendence of the flesh and a release from the constraints of a fixed and permanent subjectivity.

Rainer, Yvonne (1934–) is a North American choreographer who was first associated with the Judson Dance Theatre of the early 1960s. Rainer made work as a dancer and choreographer for 15 years (1960–75) before turning to filmmaking. Rainer trained with Anna Halprin and developed the techniques she learned from Halprin to further her own approach to choreography. She sought to push the body's physical limits to create a new dance vocabulary that embraced grotesque postures and gestures as well as more conventional dance movement. Rainer has made many experimental feature films as well as media projects and installations that include dance. All her work has a feminist agenda at its core. It often critiques the exploitation or deprecation of the female body in culture.

R.S.V.P. cycles (Resources, Scores, Valuation, Performance cycles) R.S.V.P. is a process that can begin with any one of the four elements listed: where Resources are all the materials that are available for use; Scores are the instructions that specify particular activities and things like time, place, music, space, etc.; Valuation is an evaluative process where feedback and analysis take place to determine the value each action has and whether it can be improved, changed or cut; and finally Performance is the enactment of the scores.

Thanatos also known as the 'Death Drive': a controversial speculative Freudian concept. Sigmund Freud suggests there are two basic

instincts or driving forces – *Lebenstriebe* or Eros (life force) and *Todestriebe* or Thanatos (death force) – that counterpoise each other. Thanatos (not a word Freud used) refers to the desire of all organisms to alleviate all possible tension; the end result is the desire to reach an inorganic state. This drive manifests itself as self-destructive impulses. Freud later suggested that the death drive played a part in all drives.

Vipassana means insight. It is a term specifically associated with the Theravadin branch of Buddhism. The Theravadin tradition is believed to most closely relate to the teachings of the Buddha and it is the dominant Buddhist practice in India and South East Asia. Theravadin Buddhism contrasts with the Mahayana (Greater Path) tradition that developed later and is practised by Tibetan and Zen Buddhists, but there are many shared understandings. When undertaking the meditative practices associated with vipassana four postures are highlighted:

The body can assume four basic postures – walking, standing, sitting, and lying down – and a variety of other positions marking the change from one posture to another. Mindfulness of the postures focuses full attention on the body in whatever position it assumes: when walking one is aware of walking, when standing one is aware of standing, when sitting one is aware of sitting, when lying down one is aware of lying down, when changing postures one is aware of changing postures. The contemplation of the postures illuminates the impersonal nature of the body. It reveals that the body is not a self or the belonging of a self, but merely a configuration of living matter subject to the directing influence of volition.

(Bodhi, 2008)

Yves Klein (1928–62) was an influential avant-garde French artist famous for his monochrome works, particularly those that used his trademark International Klein Blue. Blue was also the colour used in the creation of his notorious *Anthropometries of the Blue Period* (1960), where he used female models as living paint brushes for the creation of his work.

1968 is singled out as a time of heightened revolutionary fervour in many countries in the Western world. Many idealists and disillusioned young people were agitating for change and protesting against the injustices they saw in the world around them, in particular those

perpetrated by the United States in Vietnam. April 1968 in Columbia University, New York, witnessed a student rebellion in which students protested for a more truly democratic society. In France, following the events in the United States, there were student demonstrations throughout Paris. In Nanterre on 22 March, several hundred students, in a symbolic act of defiance, occupied the administrative building of the Université de L'Ouest Parisien. This was the genesis of the March 22 Movement, which was instrumental in creating the momentum that came to precipitate the events of May 1968. Their initially small-scale student protest acted as a catalyst that brought to an apogee the already widespread antagonism felt towards the current political regime and elitist university system. What was so shocking and unexpected to the authorities was the depth of these shared feelings, for soon the working classes had joined forces with the students until many of the universities and factories were occupied by students and workers in a demonstration of widespread solidarity. Large-scale riots and strikes followed in which 10 million workers were called out. The brutality of the police in confrontation with students was widely televised and covered by the press in France and abroad. This only strengthened the resolve of the French people to support those protesting. Charles de Gaulle was finally forced to consider the students' propositions and the workers' demands in what had become a revolutionary situation.

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