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ABRAMOVIC

A Surrealist Perspective on the Body Art of Marina Abramovic.

by

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INTRODUCTION

A retrospective of the work of Marina Abramovic was held at IMMA from September to December 1995. The exhibition featured work from 1972 to her most recent work done in 1995. The performance works from the 70s and 80s were documented by video and photography and accompanied by text. The exhibition had a powerful effect on the public. Reactions to performances in which she cut herself were particularly strong. This reaction of shock was grossly out of proportion to the place that such works held in Abramovic's oeuvre. It had the effect of making people close their minds to the issues presented by the show. Asked if they knew Abramovic's work people's automatic response became, "Isn't she the one who cuts herself?" However in my case, having read previously of Abramovic and having seen her Transitional objects displayed at IMMA some months earlier the work did not shock as it was not a first impression. Nevertheless it did raise questions about her use of her body and the message she intended to convey.

For this reason this thesis concerns itself mostly with the performance pieces. Although there are brief discussions on some sculptural objects these are intended to highlight the contrasting qualities of the body works. The focus of attention is Abramovic's use of her body in her art.

Expressing herself through her body positioned Abramovic outside traditional linguistic discourse. The thesis begins by discussing the rejection of language. The

reasons for the rejection of language are given according to the Surrealist doctrine of André Breton and the philosophy of Georges Bataille. Despite the many publications on Abramovic, her work has not been discussed from a Surrealist perspective. Bojana Pejic hinted at its influence when she mentioned that there was a Surrealist tradition in Belgrade where Abramovic worked. (Pejic,1993,p33) Also David Elliott indicated the Surrealist influence when in tracing a line through history of performance art he related Fluxus and Beuys to Dada. Abramovic was in contact with Beuys in the early 70s.(Elliott,1995,p60) Given that there is an undoubtable awareness of precursors to Abramovic's art it is surprising that there has not been any deeper research into the parallels between Abramovic and Surrealism.

The Surrealists aimed to escape the predetermined discourses of society. It emerges that in both her art and her life Abramovic has constantly challenged social boundaries. The first half of "Rejection of Language" deals with the ideas in Abramovic's works while the second section, "The Space Between" discusses the life she has lead and how it can be considered to have been lived outside of society. This takes as its basis Doris von Drathen's assertion that Abramovic is a nomad and hence exists "outside the polis". (von Drathen,1993,p237) However the "space between" is not merely a social no man's land for wanderers. It is a psychological space where intuition, Surrealism's great liberator, is at its strongest.

Breton's writings give an explanation of Surrealism, its attitudes and methods. Automatic Writing is mentioned at various stages in the discussion to illustrate Surrealism's principal technique for subconscious expression. In relating it to Abramovic it is intended as a referent easily understood by a majority of people, since it is such a well documented aspect of Surrealism.

Initially Georges Bataille's philosophy was read in an attempt to gain some insight into the abject, with the intention of discussing Abramovic's use and abuse of her body. However his writing is more extensive than discussions of the taboo body and Abramovic's art has concerns broader than wanton masochism. Bataille's theory of the two axes of the body and the Pineal Eye provided a fascinating physiological counterpoint for Abramovic's "Freeing the Voice".(Hollier,1989.) The discussion inspired by these theories, is the basis of the arguement that Abramovic rejects language to release the primal self, consequently freeing herself.

Bataille's sovereign god, the Acephale, is shown to be the completely liberated insubordinate being. The thesis does not claim that Abramovic represents this being in the 1990s but offers the Acephale as the logical embodiment of a being who has overcome the fear of death. The sovereignty of the Acephale is impossible. But as an antidote to the fear of death, as perceived by Abramovic, it is suitably audacious.

Her much quoted statement regarding the cultures of the East comes across as a simplistic fascination with a foreign culture.

> When I went to Tibet...I saw that all these cultures pushed the body to the physical extreme in order to make a mental jump, to eliminate the fear of pain, and of all the bodily limitations we live with. We in Western society are so afraid."
>
> (Elliott,1995,p63)

But it is not intended to deride Abramovic, her time spent in Tibet and the conviction of twenty five years of continually developing artwork deserves admiration. However the broad generalisation of the above statement and the lack of explanation of the different state of consciousness reached during performances, does tend to seem inadequate. This prompted the investigation of Surrealism and the application of its tenets to her work in order to illustrate what this described state of consciousness might be and what might be achieved through escaping reason.

Following the discussion of these ideas the thesis looks at the relationship between performer and audience in Abramovic's performances, both alone and with Ulay, her partner for twelve years. Taking the ideal of the sovereign being as a completely separate persona independent of all external objects, the discussion analyses subject/object relations according to Sartre's theory of the antagonistic psychological relationship between two bodies.In the performances the roles of

subject and object vary according to the activity of one or other body. The discussion treats the alteration of roles as the energy dialogue of Abramovic's performances.

DISCUSSION

REJECTION OF LANGUAGE

Although much has been written about Abramovic there has been a lack of writing concerned with the materiality of the body. The philosophy of Georges Bataille, written during the first half of the century, provides an interesting viewpoint which can be applied to her work.(Hollier,1989) It is a philosophy of the abject which concentrates on the body's physicality. The abject is that which is taboo in society. It is preferably ignored.

Bataille dealt with the prohibited aspects of the body. He saw the human body as having in its evolution imposed its own restrictions on self-expression.

The structure, or architecture as Bataille saw it, of the animal body is simple. It begins at the mouth. (Hollier,1989,p80) This is not immediately clear in terms of structure. Why not the ear which is on top or the outstretched paw ? Where is the skeletal structure positioned if architecture begins at the mouth ? Bataille was not talking simply about physical structure but about function.

The animal functions primarily through the mouth, to kill, to eat and to communicate. The human is not dependent on any one organ. His architecture is complex. Structurally man has evolved as a distinctly different animal. He stands on his hindlegs and has made hands of his paws. He has invented tools. Invention has necessitated language in

order to classify objects. (Fischer,1963,p23) The human animal systematises in a desire for order.

In an attempt to illustrate man's complex architecture Bataille cited two axes of the body: vertical (biological) and horizontal (ideological).The biological is spinal, from mouth to anus. Eyes and mouth comprise the ideological; organs of communication. (Hollier,1989,p80)

Articulation is a trait of the homo sapiens. Yet whilst communicating on this level only the horizontal axis is functioning. The biological, spinal axis is temporarily repressed, giving way to language. If it fully expressed itself the human would adopt the classic hysterical position of body arched and head thrown back. This would be unrestrained physical expression. The sounds accompanying this state however would be bestial cries and grunts.(Hollier,1989,p81) To articulate in this position would be to return to the ideological axis which, as a horizontal, is directly opposed to the vertical axis.

Bataille's theory was a dramatic way of illustrating the formal contingency of language. But it suggests a very clear reading of Abramovic's "Freeing the Voice" (Plate 1). In this performance she lay down with her head thrown backwards over the edge of the mattress and screamed until losing her voice. Abramovic went beyond ridding herself of articulate language and emitted every last sound available.

A parallel work, "Freeing the Memory" was a process whereby she exhausted conscious thought by letting it wear itself out. She spoke an incoherent monologue of words as

Plate 1; "Freeing the Voice", (1975)

they came to mind. Eventually after an hour and a half she could recall no more. The context or non context in which she spoke reduced the words' meaning both individually, and collectively as a language.

In both performances Abramovic symbolically freed her body and her mind of a language curtailing her range of expression. The exorcism of language was fundamental to Abramovic's work.

The position assumed by Abramovic was that of the orgasmic body. It is ecstatic, beside itself. It signifies the idea that a new self is unleashed. This is the primal self which exists before the onset of language, before socialisation. By returning to the primal animal body Abramovic freed herself of the restrictions imposed by society. The fundamental difference between humans and animals are the limitations that man sets himself by prohibiting certain aspects of his existence. The animal does not curtail its own behaviour nor does it contrive philosophies about the nature of its existence which subordinate itself to a remote ideal of Freedom. The restrictions that humans impose on themselves with notions of transcendency will be dicussed later.

In the history of twentieth century art the Surrealist movement did most to usurp the rhetoric of language. The movement's influence on Abramovic should not be underestimated. In the 1930s Breton established the surrealist tradition in Belgrade and it was here that Abramovic was to work in the early 1970s.

Performance Art's history can be traced from the Futurist movement through Dada and onwards from Surrealism. Before developing their own painterly style the Italian Futurists had done many performances. These were often riotous affairs and declaimed the art of the past.(Goldberg,1979,p171)

The Dada movement developed an anarchic tendency towards art, allowing all mediums equal footing. When Tristan Tzara tried to organise Dada into a potent art movement Hugo Ball, an original member of Dada at the Cabaret Voltaire, left the group. He was opposed to the structuring of the movement. Zurich Dada dissolved. Tzara moved to Paris where he joined with André Breton and others to continue Dada activities. Disagreements over the group's ideologies led to it splitting and in 1924 Breton published the Surrealist Manifesto thus initiating a movement which would clarify its aims in his voluminous writings. Surrealism's creed is as relevant today as it was then.

The aim of the surrealists was the "Liberation of the mind" and consequently the liberation of man.(Breton,1978,p115) The artistic practice of Surrealism challenged the perceived notion of reality. When Breton asked, "Does not the mediocrity of our universe depend essentially on our powers of enunciation ?", he was attacking the limitations imposed by language on our experience of the world.(Breton,1978,p25) The "logical mechanism of the sentence" was incapable of giving man the

"emotive shock" that gave value to his life.(Breton,1978,p132)

Surrealist art aimed to escape logic.It adopted the method of Automatic Writing. This was writing without any premeditated structure and was intended as an expression of thought uncontrolled by reason and aesthetic or moral preoccupations.(Breton,1978,p122) Despite disrupting the stucture of language by producing unexpected meanings Automatic writing still operates within this structure. If one were to be free one would have to reject language entirely.(Bataille,1994,p49)

Bataille's concept of freedom was a hysterical posturing, physically disabling language. Surrealism was a "horror of ways of life made explicit by discourse".(Bataille,1994,p55) The discourse to which Bataille referred was the representational one of language.

In speaking a language we implicitly submit to being classified by it. While words may be manipulated to create meaning, this meaning positions us in a context predetermined by the language structure. It is a submission to an outside authority. Language defines the subject for the Other but this definition is a representation of the subject. It distorts the true self and sterotypes the individual. The subject is classified by a "discourse which precedes him" (Jefferson,1989,p170). Language assimilates the subject by defining him, denying him autonomy.

Abramovic's rejection of language in the performances discussed positioned her outside of this representational discourse. It was not simply a symbolic gesture limited to those performances. In most of her work total silence has activated a tension between performer and audience. On occasions when she has used language, it has been the focus of attention rather than a devious manipulator.

In "Talking About Similarity" Ulay sewed his lips together thus refusing speech as a device to explain himself (Plate 2). Instead Abramovic spoke for him. Bojana Pejic sees this as Abramovic also rejecting language because she speaks only for the other (Pejic,1993,p34). The performance ended when she made a statement about herself. Abramovic appears sympathetic towards Sartre who said that he never knew if he signified what he wished to signify. He could not understand what he expressed for the Other as he did not share their perspective.(Jefferson,1989,p163)

Abramovic chose to say nothing about herself for fear of inevitable misinterpretation. Ulay was represented at a double remove, that of language spoken by another. He emerges a more sympathetic character because there is a tangible scapegoat for his misrepresentation; Abramovic. The normal response would be to let him have his say but Abramovic has already shown this to be a false premise.

Plate 2; "Talking About Similarity", (1976)

"THE SPACE BETWEEN"

Body art allowed Abramovic to participate in a discourse not yet assimilated into the cultural mainstream. Performance, although around since Futurism, was not a readily classifiable practice. The term encompasses many art forms, ranging from theatre to video. Can a private performance done before a camera still be considered "performance" ? A performance may also be confused with a Happening (an event that originated with Allan Kaprow in the sixties.). Happenings depended on spontaneity and improvisation. The audience were often a part of the event, unlike a performance by Chris Burden where there was a distinct separation of Burden and the public.

Yet despite obvious differences in the practise of Performance art the term is still used to refer to any artist who has engaged his/her body in the final art piece. The word "piece" is itself inaccurate since many performances were never intended as objects but as ephemeral events. Performance art has been questionably indexed in the history of art because of the difficulty in classifying it. It is difficult to document an event that is intrinsically live. A practice, existing since the start of the century, that features in so many varied styles of art, defies categorization.

Abramovic's adoption of body art was not so much a choice as a necessity. Travelling nomadically with Ulay in a van meant there was no studio in which to work. Hence her body became the most appropriate medium of expression.

Doris von Drathen considers Abramovic to be a nomadic artist.(von Drathen,1993,p234). She differentiates nomadism from globetrotting on the basis that for a nomad the travelling between points is as important a part of life as the stationery existence at these points. The globe trotter, on the other hand is only interested in seeing different localities. He moves on when tired of a place. Nomads are not interested in the locality or the community that lives there.(von Drathen,1993,p234) As nomads are a tribal group their community is already formed. They do not seek to infiltrate different social structures as they occupy their own.

Von Drathen is perceptive in describing Abramovic's art as her "second skin".(von Drathen, 1993,p234) The nomad traditionally lived in a woollen tent. It was a mobile dwelling which meant that at no stage did the nomad lay claim to any territory. Land was forsaken once left. The nomad did not expand his personage to include material possession. Only his tent and animal herds were his own and these herds were the possession of the tribe.

Abramovic's art used her body as its material. The few props she used were expendable and not important to the performances as objects in themselves. Her life dictated her art. It may be seen as a second skin in that it often resembled an extension of the private life lead by Abramovic and Ulay. A piece written in Detour recounts an incident in their life. They stayed in the van for one month during snowy conditions. They did exercises. "We moved and breathed inside the car until the car

defrosted".(Abramovic/Ulay,1980,p196) This behaviour bears a strong resemblence to the austerity of many of their performances.

Whilst living with Ulay, Abramovic laid claim to no fixed abode other than the van in which they lived. This lifestyle enabled her in a very real sense to escape the boundaries of society. She achieved the liberation of the mind by first liberating herself. It was a freedom in marked contrast to her life in Yugoslavia. She grew up in a strict environment. Both parents were politically active. Her father was a general in the partisan army and her mother a major. In 1968 during the time of student unrest throughout Europe Abramovic was head of the Party cadre in the Belgrade Academy of Fine Arts.(Elliott,1995,p55) She grew up engaged in the political struggle in Tito's Communist Yugoslavia.

Family life appears to have been somewhat unstable. Abramovic grew up living mostly with her grandmother, whose kitchen represented the centre of her universe.(Abramovic,1992,p15) Her mother was obsessional about cleanliness and discouraged Abramovic from playing with local children because of the risk of contracting germs.(Elliott,1995,p55) Abramovic was fourteen when her parents divorced.(Abramovic,1992,p11) However despite what is described as a "fragile unity" in the home Abramovic remained there until the age of twenty eight.(Elliott,1992,p55)

Her subsequent existence with Ulay signified an embracing of a freedom never to be relinquished. In Detour their life in the van is described;

No fixed living place

Permanent movement

Direct contact

Self selection

Local relation

Passing limitations

Taking risks

Mobile energy

(Abramovic/Ulay,1980,p190)

It was a life independent of responsibilities to others. Limitations were passing because the pair were always moving. The interval between stops was an important time for Abramovic's creative thinking. In an interview with Von Drathen she described how, during the "sojourn between locations" her perception was greater. (Von Drathen,1993,p234) Whilst living in one place routine and order limit the imagination. The social structure limits the range of thought according to the way society behaves. Being without a home left one vulnerable and consequently more awake.

Von Drathen likens the travelling interval to a psychological space that operates intuitively. In the philosophy of Henri Bergson the self cannot perceive itself despite knowing itself to be. This space which cannot be occupied is known as a "zone indeterminée". It exists between the establishment of the ego and the

development of the relationship to the ego.(Von Drathen, 1993,p236) Since the relationship to the ego depends on language as representing the ego the zone indeterminée exists prior to the individual's learning of language. Abramovic's art operates in this area. Von Drathen accurately points out that the work explains nothing.(Von Drathen,1993,p229) It would not since explanation implies articulated thought.

The zone indeterminée is given a physiological location by Bataille in his fantasy of L'Oeil Pineal.[1] Although a fantasy, and the reason why will become obvious, the pineal eye is birthed in reason. The pineal or pituitary gland is a secretory gland in the brain.It is still considered as representing a third eye or sixth sense. The sixth sense is traditionally held to be that of intuition. The function of the pineal gland (epiphysis) is twofold; it develops sexuality and intelligence. (Hollier,1989,pp116-117)

In "Le Bleu du Ciel" Bataille wrote;

> "When I carefully seek out in deepest anguish, some strange absurdity, an eye opens up at the top, in the middle of my skull"
>
> (Hollier,1989,p131)

[1] Bataille never succeeded in completing "L'Oeil Pineal", despite attempting it on five different occasions. His notes emerged posthumously. Hollier attributes this to the nature of the subject matter he was attempting to describe. Since the pineal eye operates outside of reason, language could not define it.(Hollier,1989,p117.)

This imaginary eye occupies the same locus as the gaping hole of a mouth that emits disarticulated noises in lieu of language. Bataille confirmed that the pineal eye is represented by this displaced mouth when he wrote that "This eye .....is not the work of reason, it is a cry escaping from me".(Hollier,1989,p131). It is the organ of intuitive reasoning. It does not see as a normal eye might because it is blinded by the sun. Staring at the sun may be likened to eating one's excrement. (Hollier,1989,p81) This bizarre statement draws its reason from the mouth having become, symbolically, an anus. It occupies the opposite pole to the biological one and utters meaningless sounds. This organ,which is a completely surreal fantasy, both excretes and assimilates. But it does so unknowingly. It is like the "zone indeterminée" of Bergson. Von Drathen even goes as far as to give this zone its various synonyms including amongst them , "the hole in the head".(Von Drathen,1993,p236)

Having located this intuitive space one is still no nearer to occupying it. It is a matter of having faith in man's perceptive abilities. Abramovic believes that in the "civilised" world the non rational abilities of humans are buried by an education grounded in reason. She aims to introduce the non rational into society.(Von Drathen,1993,p235) At the point where the brain gives up intuition prevails and at this point the public interacts with her art.

The necessity of faith dogged surrealism as much as it does Abramovic's art. Surrealism was a form of

religion. It proposed a way of changing the world, a means towards the liberation of the individual. Breton's choice of words, in asserting that Surrealism was uninterested in anything that had not, "for its ultimate aim the annihilation of being into a jewel, internal and unseeing", bore similarity to those of religious writing. (Bataille,1994,p54) The annihilation of the self features strongly in both Sufi and Buddhist religion.

For the devotee of Sufism;

> "The final goal is fana (annihilation) primarily an ethical concept of annihilating one's own qualities according to the prophetic saying "Take over the qualities of God", but slowly developing into a complete extinction of the personality".
>
> (Encycl.Britannica,1978,p945)

In the Buddhist religion there exists the concept of the Tathagata garbha. A rough English translation of this is "Embryonic Perfect one" (Tathagata meaning Perfect one or an enlightened being.) Peter Harvey described this Buddha essence as having "the intrinsic quality of a jewel". This translation was from the Ratnagotra vibhaga, a Sanskrit text on the Tathagata garbha.(Harvey,1990,p114)

Breton was probably aware of Buddhist concepts when he wrote his Surrealist doctrine. He was faced with the problem that religion was less endearing in the twentieth century than it had been in the past. Religion as practised by primitive man had purely material interests. Rituals were practised for the good of the community. Aims were often primarily agricultural. (Bataille,1994,p72)

Since man survived on the crops he grew he was dependent on the earth for survival. He did not have a scientific understanding of the cyclical character of nature. Winter's severity would have seemed like an injustice and the fruits of Summer like a reward for his goodness. Rituals developed around the seasons to regulate the cycle, to control the arbitrariness of nature. Now however man understands the cyclical character of nature and is no longer confused by it. Industrial development allowed man to believe that he controlled nature. This is not the case. The rapidity of industrial and technological progress this century has left man far removed from any real understanding of nature. The humility of primitive man who was at nature's mercy has been replaced by the arrogance and cynicism of modern man.

Ernst Fischer commented that there are times of crisis during which "the contrast between the present and the past assumes extreme forms".(Fischer,1963,p42) Abramovic's art has arisen out of such a crisis. At the end of the twentieth century people will not believe that ritual can deliver material benefit. Abramovic's role as an artist reflects Fischer's concept of the primitive artist, that of the magician who practised rituals to master nature. But today people believe less in magic. Power and capital are today's gods.(Dawes,1996.p.28) The attention given to religions with spiritual interests is largely symbolic and survives on tradition. A real appreciation of Abramovic's art relies on faith; whether or not one believes in alternate states of consciousness

and their possible benefit. However the inspiration of a new faith in people is a difficult task. Surrealism was greeted by the broader public with feelings of "emptiness, hopelessness, uselessness, superfluity and frivolousness". (Bataille,1994,p.78) Abramovic's art faces the same problems today.

There is an essential paradox in seeking to restore the lost harmony of earth and man. It is similar to the problem faced by surrealism represented by man's self conscious character. Surrealism consciously sought the renaissance of the primitive man. Automatic writing facilitated primal expression. However primitive man was fundamentally different from the modern man in that in the first instance he was unconscious of his nature. Psychoanalysis has separated man's awareness of the conscious and unconscious mind. In seeking to revert to primal expression, that of his unconscious, man will monitor his "progress" by conscious reflection, thus negating any latent primacy. (Bataille,1994,p72) It would be unnatural for modern man to be primal, to revel completely in an animal nature. Only through ritual can primacy be consciously experienced. It is only a symbolic primal state since it is consciously understood.

Abramovic's use of the gallery provided a suitable environment for the enactment of ritual.Its architectural framework separated the performances from everyday life. There is a strong degree of religiousity in the enactment of rituals within a gallery. The function of the building is comparable to a church. Bataille was of the opinion

that a museum was like a city's lungs; crowds poured in like blood "every Sunday" and left purified and refreshed (Hollier,1989,pXIII). Similarly each week people visit a church and leave absolved of sin, purified.

Abramovic made the gallery space sacrosanct by enacting rituals within it, heightening the level of religiousity described previously. She did this through using her body. The audience were confronted with what they could most readily identify. Her body became the sacred instrument of each ritual. The sacred is an object that matters intimately to the subject. The object and subject interpenetrate or exclude each other (in resistance to interpenetration) but in either case complete each other.(Bataille,1994,p115) When Abramovic cut herself the audience could imagine the pain felt. In "AAA AAA", when Abramovic and Ulay screamed at each other incessantly, the audience could feel the tension of the confrontation. In any instance involving a human performing the audience's emotions are at their most sensitive as any occurrence is registered intuitively before being met by reason.

The performances were governed by predetermined activities. From this starting point actions determined themselves. Whilst being enacted they represented their own specific moment in time. The performances referred to nothing beyond themselves. This should be understood as being within the context of the performance. Clearly the performances, viewed as art, refer to many things, for example, the Buddhist and Sufi rituals from which Abramovic derived many of her personal rituals.

"The Lovers"(1988), their epic walk along the Great Wall of China may be seen as a magnification of their earlier performances. They set out from opposite ends of the Wall and eventually met in the middle whereupon their life together ended. When speaking of her exhaustion whilst walking the Great Wall Abramovic described how the essential quality of walking emerged. After a few hours walking she thought that she would faint. By continuing and ignoring this state of mind she overcame rational thought;

> "At the moment when I stopped thinking about it, the pain stopped, I simply no longer felt my body. My thoughts ceased. I was in a state of complete inner emptiness. And at precisely that moment - I only realise this looking back I came closer to my body. I became my body."
>
> (von Drathen,1993,p230)

In this state of mind perception was limited to the instant in which it occurred. Abramovic's admission, that she only realised what had occurred within her whilst walking, after the event bears testament to the essentially conscious nature of man. The assessment of actions is inavoidable. Ritual was necessary to escape the contingency of modern life. Otherwise the instant could never truly be experienced.

The value of the instant was expressed by Ulay in Modus Viviendi when he announced with minimal verbalising the nature of his actions as he proceeded across the stage; "Hearing, hearing; moving, moving, touching

touching". Each word described, precisely, his actions as they ocurred. This technique of recitation of "present awareness" was derived from Burmese vispassanic Buddhist meditation.(McEvilley,1985,p12)

Abramovic's techniques for escaping her consciousness are comparable to the Automatic Writing of the Surrealists. Automatic writing stimulated the unbridled expression of unconscious thought. If ever consciousness interceded (as was inevitable) and the writing became too lucid, Breton advised that the letter "L" be immediately inserted to begin a new word that would again stimulate the unconscious.(Breton,1978,p124) Similarly Abramovic's performances used a predetermined structure to house the irrational. Rational thought liberated the irrational. The challenge for the public was to undestand what she experienced in that release.

It was the experience of the instant independent of past and future, responsibility or ambition. In short; ecstasy, an orgasmic sensation. Orgasm ruptures bodily identity, integrating subject and object, consciousness and unconsciousness into one physical sensation. Such a state of existence (if it were to be permanent) would be, to use Bataille's description of unsubordinated poetic release, "viriley sovereign".

The sovereign experience would be completely physical, hence irreligious since religion values the spiritual above the physical. The gratuitous enjoyment of purely physical pleasure goes against the creed of any

religion that believes in salvation existing in the form of a transcendental existence.

Spiritual religion offers a superior end to its followers. Ritual activity is not allowed exist as an end in itself no matter what its liberating effects. Man subordinates himself to an ulterior goal. He has an inherent inability to "give value to the instant". (Bataille,1994,p65) Value resides in the end pursued not in its pursuit. This is paradoxical in the case of spiritual religion. Since the end pursued exists beyond life on earth it can never be attained. Religion makes its followers subservient to a superior existence which they will never experience while still being their earthly selves.

The stated aim of Abramovic's performances was to reach a different state of consciousness, to overcome bodily limitations. In her rituals she achieved this, albeit temporarily. Taken to an extreme the perpetual experience of being in the body denies the existence of any spiritual realm.

A sovereign being is subservient to nothing; not to other people nor to any transcendental morality. Nothing remains separate from the sovereign being, hence transcendency is abolished.(Weiss,1986,p138) In attempting to overcome the fear of death Abramovic sought to attain this state of being. She rebelled against social taboo to attain a mastery of self independent of the social structure.

Bataille's mythical god, the Acephale, created in 1930 was a two headed body. Janus, the Roman god of doorways had two heads symbolising origins and transition.(Weiss,1986,p130) The second Acephale which appeared six years later in the journal, "Acephale", was a headless figure.(Plate 4) It was the embodiment of sovereignty. (Weiss,1986,p129) Headless, the figure is not subject to its own identity. The ego escapes through the pineal space left by the decapitated head. Reason is absent. Nothing is assimilated. The body is purely material and collates no history of itself. Being speechless it avoids linguistic representation. He is neither subject nor object. Unlike the two headed Janus, the Acephale is neither coming nor going. He simply existed as an indefinable point in space and time.

An early Abramovic performance, "Freeing the Body", the third in the trio that included "Freeing the Voice" and "Freeing the Mind", finds its counterpoint in the headless Acephale. She danced to an African drum beat for eight hours at which point she dropped.(Plate 4) While dancing she wore a black hood over her head.It symbolized a rejection of the ego and of conscious reasoning.By dancing for so long to the hypnotic rhythm of a drum she released herself from conscious control and allowed her body control her. It only let her stop when it was physically exhausted. The drummer too was controlled by her body since he was obliged to continue until she stopped. The experience derived from the performance was purely physical as was that of the Acephale.

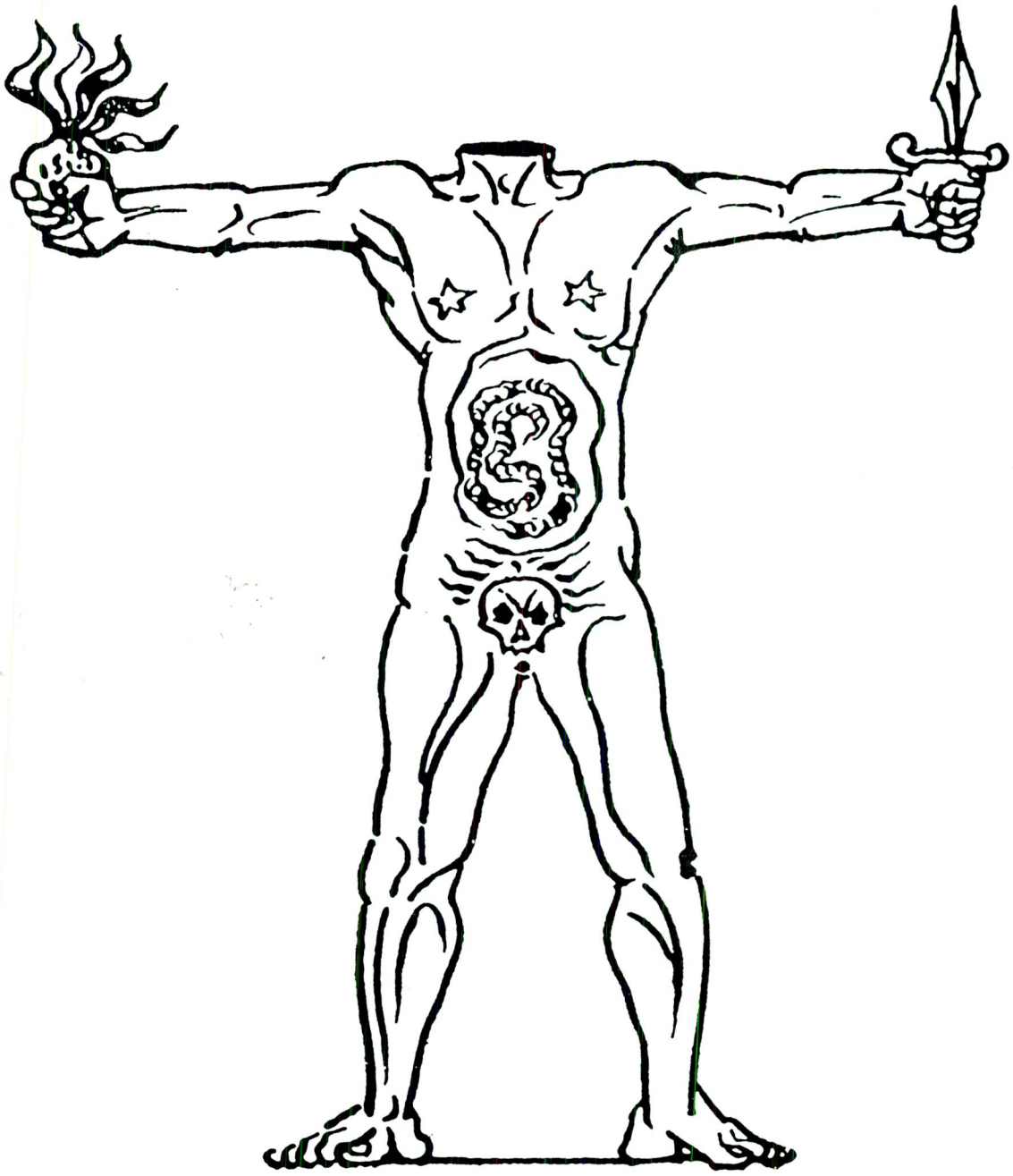


Plate 3; "The Acephale"

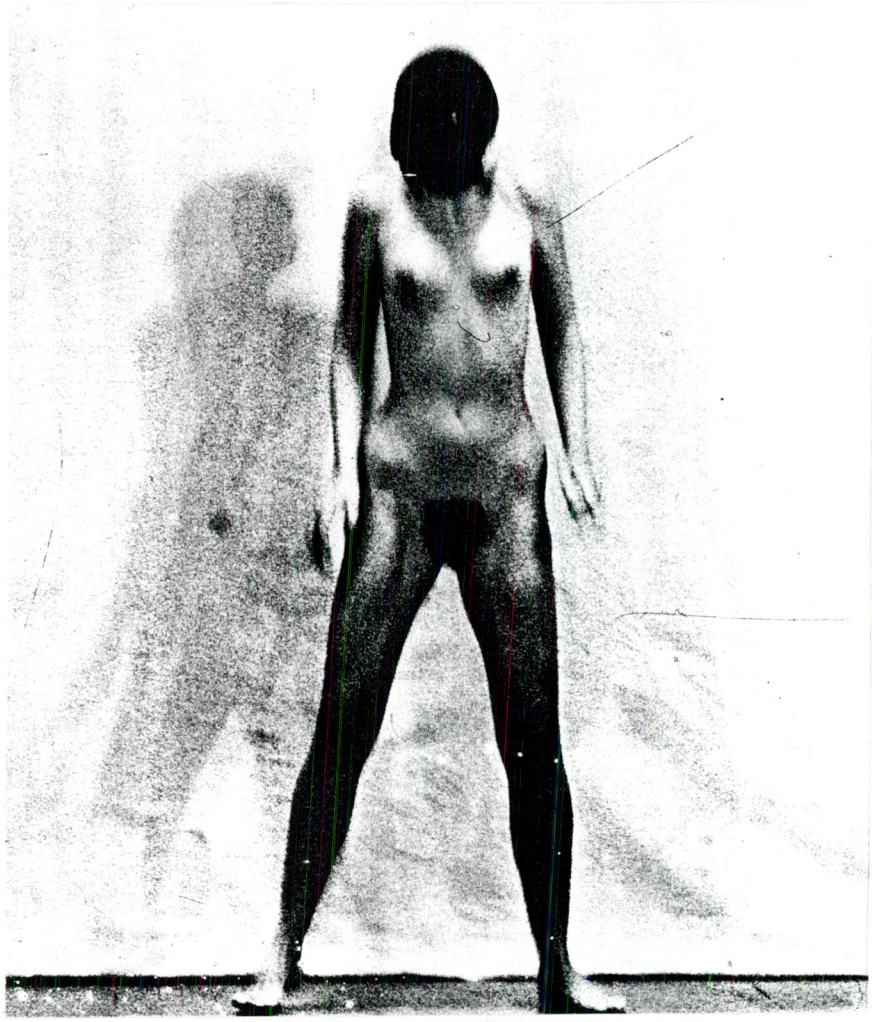


Plate 4: "Freeing the Body", (1975)

It is obvious that anybody having a fear of death would be subservient to this fear. A life spent ruminating on the likelihood of an afterlife would be an abysmal model of a human life. So by the perpetual experience of the instant this worry would be deferred until death rendered such worry impossible.

The irony is that in using rituals, which are essentially religious, Abramovic merely perpetuated the notion that death is sacred. Although the formal architecture of the gallery provided a solemn setting for her actions it positioned her at the very centre of social constructs. The four walls of the gallery represent the social obsession for containing and categorizing. Although she may have destroyed the architecture of her body in "Freeing the Voice" she still relied upon the larger gallery environment to achieve this aim. Whether or not she lost her fear of death becomes irrelevent since it seems to have been such an all consuming passion. In continually striving to overcome bodily limitations Abramovic was subservient to this desire. Her belief that, through their rituals, Tibetan monks overcame their fear of death is misguided.

If inspected closely Buddhism can be seen to be as concerned with death as the prevalent Christian religion of the west (Abramovic was raised a Christian).The first of the Four Holy Truths of Buddhism is that suffering, "dukkha", is inherent in all things. This concept of dukkha refers to the impermanence of all worldly things. It is not saying that life is a painful experience but

that it is composed of events which rise only to fall and be replaced by subsequent ephemeral events. This causes the general unsatisfactoriness of life (Harvey,1990,p48). This view may be seen to posit death (terminations, endings, events that pass) as the cornerstone of earthly life. Ultimately there is the physical death of the body.

Buddhists believe that even this death is impermanent. The spirit undergoes reincarnation in a different realm. What this realm is depends on the merit of the previous lives lived. To step out of a possibly endless cycle of reincarnation a Buddhist can reach Nirvana. This is considered as a timeless, birthless, deathless realm within the person (Harvey,1990,p62). It need only be revealed through the practising of meditation and an adoption of the Buddhist ethical code (Holy Eightfold Path). On a very basic level Nirvana is another realm to which we may aspire while dogged by the suffering of mortality.

It is incorrect to suggest that the Tibetan culture has eliminated the fear of death when its religion was founded upon the fear or incomprehension of death.

"SUBJECT / OBJECT RELATIONS"

In the case of performance art the nature of the relationship between viewer and artpiece is different than that between, for instance, a painting and its viewer. Both parties are conscious of each other hence there is a tension created where consciousnesses react.

Chantal Pontbriand explains how a dialogue can be established between performer and spectator. The artist is an energy source. During a performance there is an expenditure of energy which produces a transformation. A receptive audience will perceive this transformation. For it to occur the spectator must identify with the performer.(Pontbriand,1979,p21) This entails seeing oneself in the other, thus bridging the gap between the two.

The philosophy of Sartre is particularly relevant in discussing Abramovic since she uses her body as a medium and the Sartrian dilemma of the subject/object relationship hinges on the body as a focus for identity. According to Sartre in his theorising of self and Other, the self's identity is completed by the viewpoint of the Other. The self has an incomplete view of itself due to being positioned in its own body. Its viewpoint is too subjective. Subject and Object behave antagonistically. The self is aware of the Other's alternate image of itself but does not know this image. It cannot, as to step outside itself and see itself objectively is physically impossible. Identity is founded upon two images, the self

remains alienated from the objective image. The antagonism is a binding force between subject and object.

The roles of subject and object took a peculiar twist in Abramovic's performances. On occasion she assumed both of these roles distorting the audience's usual perspective. Tension ensued from this action.

In Rhythm 2 Abramovic took medicines normally given to the schizophrenic and the catatonic. As it was a performance in the Rhythm series the taking of pills could be read as an attempt to reach a different state of consciousness or to assume a different identity whilst performing. Other works in the series involved voluntary (Rhythm 2) and involuntary (Rhythm 5) unconsciousness. However the work carried sociological meaning. Abramovic assumed the role of the medical service which controls segments of society with its medicines. She became a patient capable of administering her own treatment, capable of controlling her own body. The performance highlighted the control exercised over people's bodies within society.

By taking control of herself using society's medium she assumed the role of object in relation to her subjective state as patient. The audience - the immediate society in this instance - were left powerless as their objective potentiality was removed.

In her performances with Ulay, society was alienated in a series of Relation works (1976-1980) which focussed on the interdependency of their relationship. The performance Light/Dark suggested a closed off, self

sufficient individual despite there having been two people performing. (Plate 5) They knelt opposite each other and began slapping each other in the face. They continued alternately, accelerating the rhythm. As the performance approached its conclusion there was barely a pause between slaps and both artists were flinching in anticipation of being hit. It endured for twenty minutes until Abramovic did not return the blow. Whereas previously she had punished herself here she hit Ulay, positioning him as the object in relation to herself. Ulay reciprocated the abuse, treating Abramovic as an object. Since both played the mutual roles of self and other they could be seen as one being. Important to this idea is that they were a couple and they took their union to an extreme.

Abramovic and Ulay met in 1975 and the relationship instantly had the curiousity of their birthdays coinciding; Nov. 30th 1946 and 1943 respectively. They marked subsequent birthdays with performances. Mark Dawes described the relationship as "a laboratory for the creation of new forces" (Dawes,1996,p26). It is an accurate description. The Relation Works (which include Light/Dark) placed their relationship on public display. This was as much a test of its strength as were the tests of endurance the couple underwent.

Another Relation work, "Breathing in /Breathing out" performed in 1977 and again on their birthday in the same year, evokes the idea of mutual dependency.(Plate 6) Abramovic and Ulay knelt opposite each other and maintained a kiss for nineteen minutes. They were both

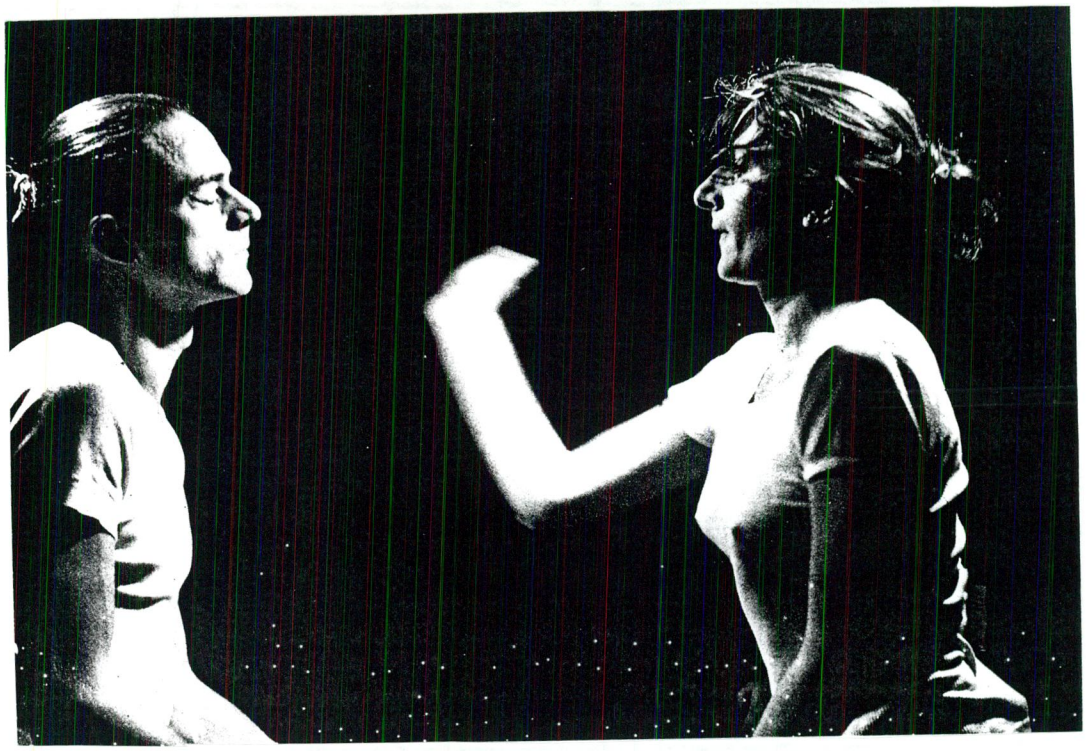


Plate 5: "Light/Dark"

Plate 6: "Breathing in/Breathing out"

breathing in abnormally high amounts of carbon dioxide. Despite the large crowd at the event they seemed oblivious to any external activity. The physical fusion between the two was a metaphor for complete mental as well as physical union.

This unity may be likened to Aristophanes theory that ideal lovers were two wandering bodies searching for their other half which had previously been cut from them (Hamilton,1951,190b - 192e)

A sculptural work, "The Lovers" suggests a similar idea but carries far less resonance.(Plate 7) It lacks the tension of the living, breathing bodies of Ulay and Abramovic. Two large vessels lie horizontally joined at the mouths. The vessels have contrasting surfaces, gloss and matt. A text accompanies the piece stating, "In conjunction lies the only possibility of supreme peace and rest".(Meschede,1993,pp240-241) The statement reads like wishful thinking because it seems to forget the intensity of "Breathing in / Breathing out. Peace and rest were not in evidence as Abramovic and Ulay knelt locked together mouth to mouth. Their breathing was often unsteady as they struggled to maintain the kiss. Also due to the high levels of carbon dioxide inhaled their consciousness would have been altered.

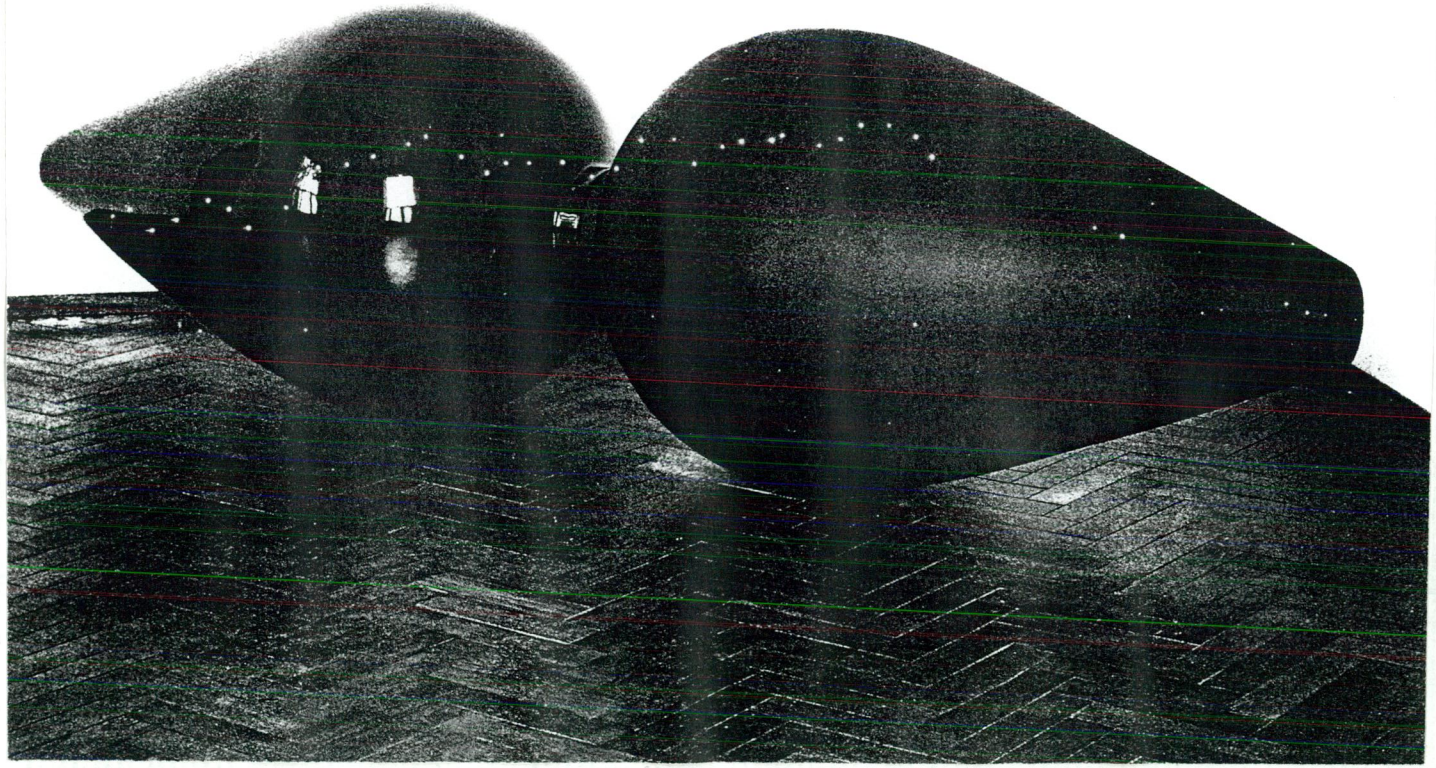


Plate 7: "The Lovers", (1986)

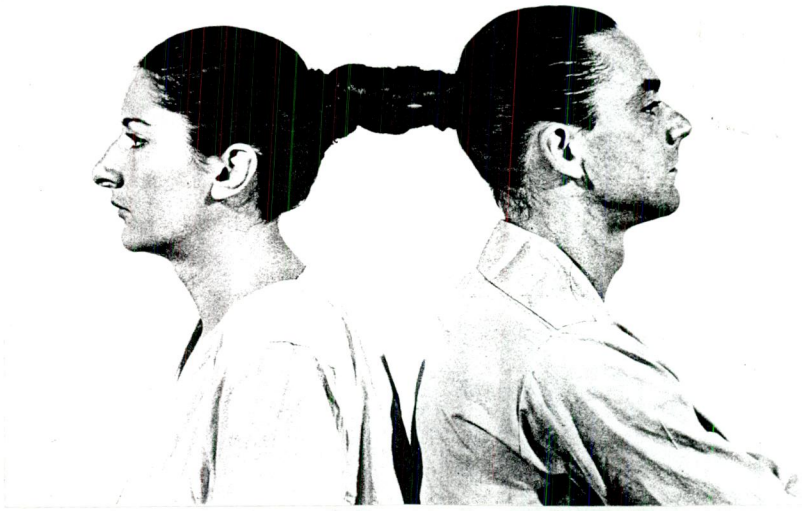
It is ironic that when "The Lovers" was made the relationship had begun to deteriorate. In Biography, a performance from 1992, Abramovic recounted her life in succinct notes -

1985 Death of Ulay's mother
More polaroids
We stop making love
1986 Ulay starts drinking
We are unable to perform
Instead we build two black vases
the size of our bodies

(Abramovic,1992,p43)

This was the concluding exposé of a relationship lived both intensly privately and extremely publicly. Although still making art together the level of energy created by the works had decreased. This energy had been produced by the forces between the two lovers, between the antagonism of subject and object at its most intense.

Speaking of "Relation in Time", where they stood back to back for seventeen hours with their hair braided together, Abramovic said that after about ten hours the relationship was only plastic.(Plate 8) Physically they were joined but mentally their minds functioned independently. Within there was a "separation" (Pejic,1993,p34). It is as if their individual subjectivity reclaimed its autonomy unable to give itself to the other. This is mutually beneficial as neither can be lost in the other. If this were to happen they would not exist for each other, their separate subjectivities



1st Hour.

17th Hour.

Plate 8: "Relation in Time", (1977)

having disintegrated. Each opposing object is only a representation of another subject.

In 1979 on their birthday Abramovic and Ulay enacted "Communist body, Capitalist body". It was a passive performance which created an environment for the formation of tensions between audience and artists. The pair had invited a number of friends to attend a party at fifteen minutes before midnight. When the guests arrived both Abramovic and Ulay lay asleep in a bed at the end of the room. In the centre were two small tables laid with food and cutlery. During this performance the artists did nothing but remain asleep.

Three weeks later Abramovic and Ulay interviewed the guests about their impressions of that night. The responses showed clearly the gap between the two parties and the obsession of filling in that gap by an act of the imagination.

The most extreme reaction was that of Louwrien Wiejers. He described the party as a nightmare. It was like a funeral because the hosts were asleep. (Abramovic/Ulay,1980,p175) This reaction reflects very little search for meaning in the silence between host and guests. Wiejers seemed desperate to identify himself wholly in the Other, the absence of which frightened him. He felt uncomfortable during the whole affair. Even whilst enjoying the other guests' company he was constantly distressed by the sleeping couple. His disorientation was caused by the lack of a focal point for his attentions. Only on returning home did he remember the video camera

that had recorded the event. This could have been used as a "substitute" for Abramovic and Ulay. Such an idea reflects on his part a wish to be part object, to be formed by the other. But it also shows a desire for the power derived from immersion in the subject/ object dialogue. By allowing a part of himself to be objectified the subject can imagine that he knows what the object sees in him. As long as the object sleeps the subject does not know how much of his self is being watched (if any). Nor may he convey an image of himself to a sleeping object. The sleeping object becomes an inpenetrable subject.

Other reactions were less panicked than Wiejer's. Perplexed by the inactivity of their hosts the guests waited to see what would happen. Dorine Mignot described it as "sort of sacrilegious" when one guest approached the bed to see if they were really asleep. (Abramovic/Ulay,1980,p172) The hosts had assumed a sacred position in the eyes of their guests. People were reluctant to lay presents beside the bed for fear of breaching an imaginary barrier. One reason for this would have been that Abramovic and Ulay were asleep. Sleep holds a privileged position of peace unlike wakefulness which provokes interaction.

Gijs van Tuyl made a significant observation about the sleeping hosts. Although in one sense absent through being asleep Abramovic and Ulay were in another sense "more present than ever". He said that of all "the words you utter during a conversation, you wonder what it is

exactly you are revealing of yourself". This is a perfect understanding of Sartre's difficulty in expressing himself. Van Tuyl concluded, saying that whilst asleep one is not externalising anything verbally. One is thus present in "a more significant way". (Abramovic/Ulay,1980,p174)

Hartmut Kowalke realised the importance of the guests at the party when he said that it was a performance not solely because of Abramovic and Ulay but because of the public's presence. (Abramovic/Ulay,1980,p173) The most significant thing about the event was not the sleeping couple but the tension to which this gave rise. Most of those present felt a degree of uneasiness but were able to relax with each other by reflecting on the nature of the tension. Van Tuyl perceived a change in mood when people began to eat and drink the caviar and champagne provided. It was an "expansion of boundaries". (Abramoic/Ulay,1980,p175) By breaking conventional codes new codes had to be founded. Hosts do not normally sleep while guests do not anticipate instigating proceedings. That said, Abramovic and Ulay had instigated proceedings through their passivity.

In "Lips of Thomas" the perceived roles of the artist and the audience were challenged although in this instance violence, as opposed to passivity, characterised the performance. Abramovic performed this piece before meeting Ulay. She ate a kilo of honey, drank a litre of wine and then broke the glass from which she drank. The consumption of the wine was the first stage of altering her

consciousness. She then cut a five pointed star in her stomach and whipped herself until numb to the pain. By ceasing this flagellation while still conscious of herself, if not the pain, Abramovic retained control of the ritual's proceedings. She turned upon herself as did Bataille's Acephalus who carries a sword in his hand, the instrument of his decapitation. She was simultaneously victim and executioner. By objectifying herself Abramovic attained mastery of herself. The state in which she could no longer feel pain resonates with the ecstacy of the instant as experienced by the Acephale. Only this time her ecstacy, if representable, would be agonised not joyous. This presumes that ecstacy and agony are opposite polarities of the same thing.

Her self flagellation gave way to the further torture of lying on a cross of ice beneath a heater suspended above her stomach.(Plate 9) Here the performance turned decisively when, after thirty minutes, members of the audience sympathetic to her plight removed the blocks of ice from beneath Abramovic. At this point Abramovic gave up control of the ritual. Through such an extreme act of self abuse she provoked an empathic reaction. She removed the barrier which normally separates the performer from the audience. In this relationship, particularly in the theatre, subject and object seldom mingle. The performer is the actor/object, viewed by the public. He represents the play's narrative not himself. "Lips of Thomas" began by alienating the audience in a very aggressive fashion. Sovereignty is an aggressive rejection of society.

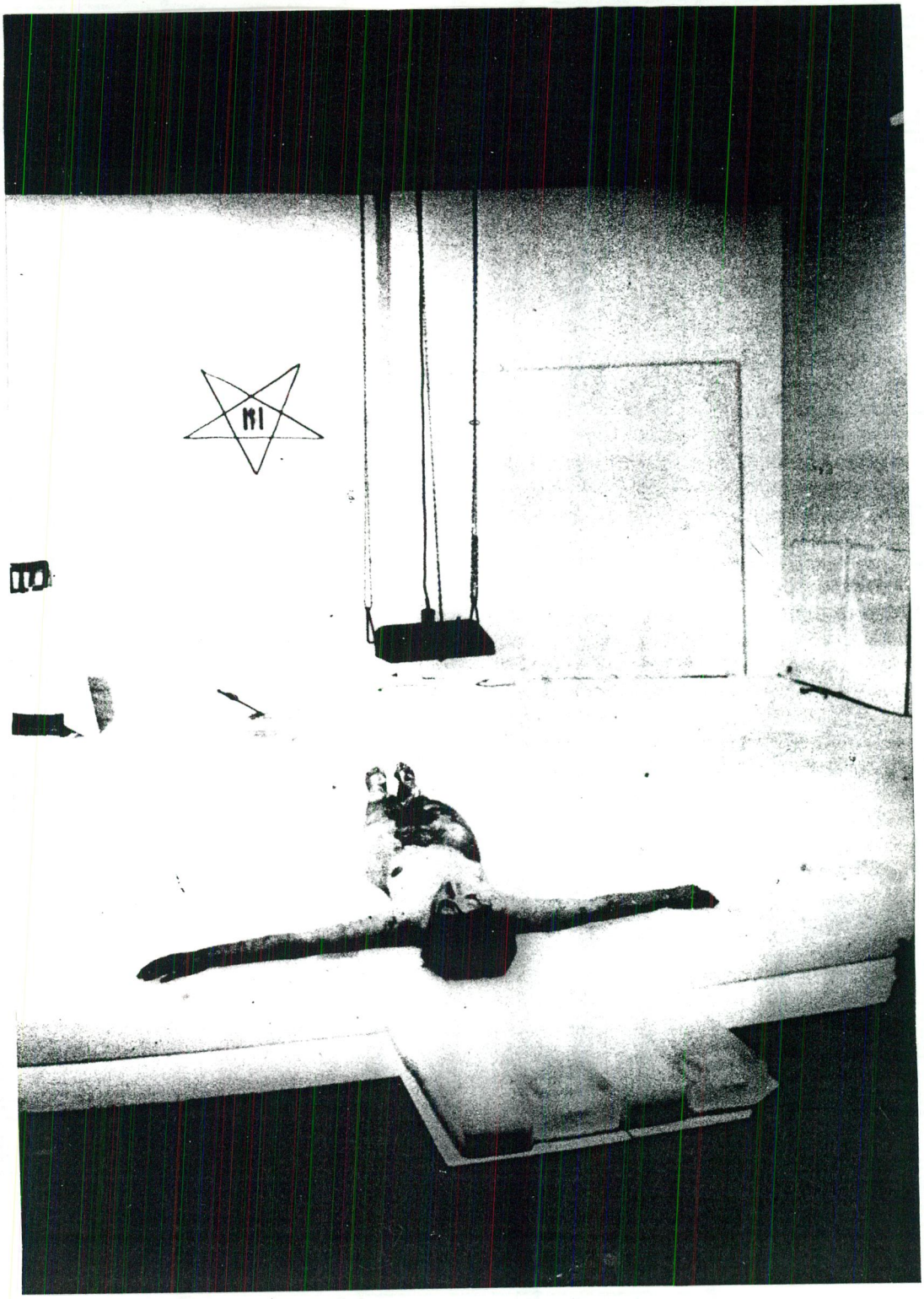


Plate 9: "Lips of Thomas", (1973)

However in its ecstatic state the sovereign being is highly vulnerable as was Abramovic when acting outside of her conscious control. At the point when the audience and objects external to herself became imperceptible these objects could most easily invade the inattentive body. From a state of aggression Abramovic became vulnerable, passing the active role in the performance to the audience. This is the energy dialogue of the performance, the alteration of active and passive roles.

In an earlier performance, Rhythm 5 (1974), she lay inside a burning five pointed star having doused it in petrol before entering. A member of the audience noticed that she was unconscious when she did not respond to the flames burning her. He carried her out . Here again the barrier between art piece and viewer, object and subject had been removed through the occurrence of real drama.

By using such frightening levels of aggression Abramovic held the public's attention. Her performances had little to do with everyday life. There is the risk in performing private rituals that the artist will not engage the public. In Abramovic's performances the viewer must not be allowed "escape into the past or future".(Goldberg,1993,p12) Both past and future are modes of representation, giving temporal context to events and spacing them in zones separate from the individual subject. This separation automatically reduces the immediacy of any event, thereby minimising its potency. The subject is more susceptable to events that happen in

its own psychological space. These events threaten its identity hence heightening its awareness of the instant.

Abramovic's more successful performances are those in which an energy transfer occurs thus breaking down the barrier between subject and object. Both "Lips of Thomas" and "Rhythm 5" achieved this to the extent that the audience were physically engaged in events. On other occasions there was a psychological involvement.

"Rest/Energy" (Plate 10), performed at ROSC in 1980 by Abramovic and Ulay was one of their most arresting works. They held a drawn bow between them, the arrow pointed at Abramovic's heart. They stood leaning away from the bow depending on it for support. The element of risk involved was intense and was registered in the recorded breathing of both artists. The tension was palpable. Watching the video documenting the event one is riveted by the image of Abramovic taunting the possibility of death.

If there were not a genuine tension created by the performances the audience would remain immune to their energy. It is important that the audience does not remain detached and that the performances are not reduced to mere spectacle. An effective ritual should operate like Carnival as theorised by Bakhtin. Carnival is not a spectacle and in it neither subject nor object exist.(Jefferson,1989,p165) People live within it. A detached observing gaze would destroy the mechanism of Carnival. The author of this gaze would not be experiencing Carnival but a representation of it. If the audience at Abramovic's performances were to see her

Plate 10: "Rest/Energy", (1980)

rituals but were to remain uninvolved, psychologically or physically, they would have only witnessed them as representations of ritual. Abramovic would have failed in her attempt to arrest their attention.

CONCLUSION

Much of this thesis has dwelt on surreal concepts of being. The Pineal eye and the Acephale are both fantasies unattainable in reality. Because of this it would be senseless to conclude by saying whether or not Abramovic had achieved her aims according to Surrealism. The thesis has offered the Acephale as the completely liberated being. Abramovic pursued a path that would ideally lead to the realisation of this character. Through the rejection of social conditioning, in terms of language, living status and behavioural etiquette she tried to liberate herself. This reflects a dissatisfaction with the Western culture in which she grew up and a desire to create a different reality for herself. A reality as perceived by her unconscious mind that could be referred to as a surreality, above and beyond the reality of conscious experience.

Consideration of her work does lead one to understand that the western man leads a life curtailed by many strictures. Bodily expression in particular is coordinated to correspond to a perceived norm. Abramovic's use of her body instantly provokes responses of shock in a public not used to seeing messages conveyed through the body. But whether or not she has attained freedom through her actions is unclear. Certainly the theoretical discussion of the rejection of language makes one want to celebrate the primal self. The rediscovery of this being will forever be an attraction because it offers a form of

Utopia in which man is free and uncorrupt. But as has been shown primacy for the modern man is impossible.

If Abramovic has attained this state in her performances has it benefitted the audience in any way? By intervening in proceedings the audience did not experience the different state of consciousness of Abramovic even though they may have taken part in the energy dialogue. Their involvement never completely dissolved the subject/object divide. These identities were challenged in the performances but they still existed whilst they alternated between performer and audience. For the audience Abramovic's action remained symbolic even though she may have experienced changes of consciousness. This may well have been the extent of her ambition. In providing indicators as to an alternate experience of reality she inspires those interested to search for it. As has been said it is a matter of faith. Whilst the sovereign being is a fantasy, the self-confident, uninhibited, constantly active person is not. What emerges form studying Abramovic is the belief that the subjective individual has, within itself, the ability to create its own life according to its own desires.

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