

NC 0021138 9



THE NATIONAL COLLEGE OF ART AND DESIGN

MARINA ABRAMOVIC. THE MODERN MARTYR?

A Thesis submitted to:

The Faculty of History of Art and Design and complementary studies
and

In candidacy for the degree

Faculty of Design
Department of Textiles

by

Patricia Middleton

February 1997

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to express my gratitude to the following people for their interest and support in the completion of my thesis:

Nicola Gordon Bowe

Lorna Healy

Elaine Sisson

The Irish Museum of Modern Art

and

Brian Fallon

MAITPOST

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Introduction

CHAPTERS

1. Background information on Marina Abramovic.
2. Performance in the Seventies.
3. Pain, Body Mutilation and Audience
Response in Performance
4. Religion and Martyrdom

Conclusion

List of Illustrations

Bibliography

INTRODUCTION

"For two decades or more now it has been widely felt that aesthetics and ethics - art and life - are to a degree meaningless without each other. The point is that in a sense each is the defining characteristic of the other"¹

The reality of life has become more and more the main concern of culture in the broadest sense and the accent has shifted from an art that is separate from life to one that concentrates on life in all its aspects. This is certainly self-evident in the art of Marina Abramovic. The events in her life are what conjure up the major inspiration for Abramovic. The events in her life are what conjure up the major inspiration for Abramovic and play a major role in her art. Having overcome the problems of form and materialism in her earlier work, Abramovic then proceeded to exhibit her own body in an attitude of personal rediscovery in a series of performance art pieces. Recognised for her performances which were based on pain, she relentlessly and systematically tested the limits of her own body, endeavouring to banish the mental pain that she has lived with since her childhood. Abramovic is an intense person, is as discovered through her performances and the reasoning behind them. She is constantly struggling with her body and mind to reach a higher state of consciousness and to make a clean break from reality to a place that is totally separate from the harshness of life as we know it.

¹ Vivendi, Modus, Ulay and Marina Abramovic.
Stedelyk Van Abbemuseum, Eindhoven, 1985.

Throughout this thesis I will be studying certain performances by Abramovic, mainly earlier solo works dating between 1973 and 1975 and how she expressed herself through her body in her performances. Dividing the thesis into various sections, I will endeavour to suggest why she or anyone would torture themselves so relentlessly. Are her intentions selfish and merely to attract attention? Acts of self-pity so that we, the viewers, will take pity on the poor tortured soul? Or is she endeavouring to heal her 'wounds', simultaneously acting as a form of therapist for the audiences benefit?

My interest in Marina Abramovic arose when I stumbled across a book of hers in a library. Performance art had always fascinated me, particularly around the late sixties-early seventies, the era when it began to become more popular. I could never understand how artists would become so involved in their work that they could mutilate their bodies to such extremes. I suppose I felt a need to understand this aspect of performance art more and, through an in depth study of the life and times of Marina Abramovic, I could begin to comprehend and understand some of its aspects.

My main sources of information were obtained from the library at the National College of Art and Design but I also used the I.L.A.C., Rathmines and U.C.D. libraries. I also chose to write to various people, most of which were very helpful. Intending to write to Abramovic herself, I found it almost impossible to obtain her Amsterdam address and she was on tour most of the time in any case. Brian Fallon (Art Critic) of the Irish Times, replied to my letter by

sending a copy of her book Objects, Performance, Video, Sound² and wrote:

"She is an overpowering personality and at fifty, still a very beautiful woman. I haven't seen her in performance, but it must be something special."

My thesis will be divided into three chapters, which will be under the headings:

- (1) Background Information
- (2) Performance in the Seventies
- (3) Pain, Body Mutilation and Audience
Response in Performance
- (4) Religion and Martyrdom

(1) Background Information

This chapter outlines the life of Abramovic as a child and her growing up in Yugoslavia. It gives background information on the state of the Yugoslavian government around the time of Abramovic's youth and on her relationship with her parents. Abramovic's life is her art and her art is her life. I feel that it is necessary, therefore, to be familiar with her background in order to begin to understand her work. She led a very unhappy life as a child; this resulted in scars from a sheltered life under the strict rule her parents and from living life as a communist around the time of which the war.

I feel that it is also important to discuss Abramovic's work, that is, to trace it right through from the beginning until the present day and to discuss how her

² Adamovich and Ramet. Beyond Yugoslavia. Politics, Economics, and Culture in a Shattered Community. Westview Press. Toronto 1995. p.5.

work has matured. I also think that it is necessary to discuss her influences in the early days and the reasoning behind the decision to choose performance art as a career.

(2) Performance in the Seventies

I feel that it is very important to consider performance art around the seventies so as to get an even deeper understanding into Abramovic's work. In performance art around this era, body mutilation, suffering and pain played a major part. Abramovic's work may have even been considered mild in comparison to that of artists like Hermann Nitsch (whose performances often involved the disembowelling of animals) or Gina Pane (whose work often involved deep incisions into the flesh using razor blades or nails).

I will proceed to discuss her influences in which Joseph Beuys would have played a major role.

This information is a vital step into an in-depth study of Marina Abramovic so as to comprehend her work to the stage of admiration.

(3) Pain, Body Mutilation and Audience

Response in Performance

Pain and body mutilation are dominant features in Abramovic's work as she relentlessly tries to banish distress from her life to achieve a more peaceful and pain-free existence in reality. In this chapter, I will discuss Abramovic's

theory of pain and compare it with that of the French artists Orlan. Orlan was born around the same time as Abramovic and, although not immediately noticeable, they have quite a lot in common as regards thoughts on pain and beauty.

Many of Abramovic's performance are audience dependent; however, her audience must be willing. In order to be even capable of comprehending the reasoning behind her performances, the audience must want to learn - impossible in the presence of an uninterested audience. Quite often an 'umbilical link' can be detected between Abramovic and the audience, and it is then that they both begin to sense similar emotions.

(4) Religion and Martyrdom

Quite an amount of Abramovic's performances have a religious undercurrent or symbolism. Many of her works are directed towards martyrdom, which I will discuss. Orlan also uses religious symbolism in her work, so a comparison between the two artists is significant and interesting.

In the beginning, before I knew very much about Marina Abramovic, I considered her and her work, if I am to be honest, insane and ludicrous. I did not have much knowledge of her past life or activities and did not actually listen to what she had to express. I wrote off her performances as being totally incomprehensible and could not even begin to understand the reasoning behind this self-inflicted torture. It was not until I actually took the

time to study and contemplate her performances, background, her theory on pain and other people's comments that I found myself understanding and agreeing with her beliefs.

In concluding this thesis, I hope that I will have conveyed my conviction that pain is a necessity in our lives and that Marina Abramovic is endeavouring to help us through her work by torturing herself into making us realise that we all need to share our feelings in order to help ourselves overcome our fears.

Led his brutal army out to battle,
Slew all dancers, burned alive the
Mad Dancing Girl,
She danced in flames until she was in ashes"

- Alan Horhaness, American Composer in the text of his "Lady of Light" (1968)²

The sentiments of this poem, give quite a clear indication of the state of Yugoslavia in the sixties.

When Abramovic was born in 1946, the world was trying to recover from the Second World War, which had claimed the lives of approximately 55,000,000 people. Apart from damage caused to buildings and cities, the damage caused to a multitude of people who survived the terrible ordeal was extremely great. Yugoslavia was no exception.

However, in the years to follow, while other European countries were rebuilding their lives, Yugoslavia under Tito's rule would face many a problem, from communism to civil war, which still causes unrest in Yugoslavia today. Tito created his own independent style of communism in 1954 but he was not prepared to oversee a drift towards Western-style democracy.

Today Yugoslavia still has its problems. It is no wonder that Abramovic has a deep disrespect for her country that after so many years that her people could not come to an agreement that would make life more peaceful for its

² Adamovich and Ramet. Beyond Yugoslavia, Politics, Economics, and Culture in a Shattered Community. Westview Press. Toronto 1995. p5.

inhabitants.

Both Abramovics parents were believing communists but because her father was a Yugoslav military general (who fought for Tito against the Germans) and her mother was a Yugoslav major, they, as a family, lived quite comfortably. The turmoil of the Yugoslavian government, combined with the incredibly strict rule of her parents, were certainly large factors in the unhappiness of Abramovics youth. Abramovic's parents are still living in Belgrade. It is understood through various interview and books written about the artist that she did not hold great respect for her parents. In an interview in the Irish Times she said that her parents were 'incredibly strict' and that 'she grew up under stern discipline'. She also expressed the opinion that her mother was 'highly ambitious for her' and that she 'had to be the best in everything', she had to 'be the first'.³

It is also understood that while still a child, Abramovic was discouraged from playing with other children for fear of contracting any infections. Her family life was quite sad and a rift was formed when her father began to stay away from home. In a recent work entitled Delusional (1994) this aspect of her life can be seen as very significant. Delusional is a performance concerning insecurity. It is almost as if she is ashamed of her past, not only of her relationship with her parents but because of Yugoslavia itself. At one point in this performance, she strips herself naked in front of an audience (almost debasing herself) and

³ Fallon, op.cit.

straddles her naked body on a metal armature whilst large projected images of her parents and a rat catcher are shown behind her. A question we must ask ourselves at this point is, is there any significance in placing her parents' images beside the images of a rat catcher. It is clear that, by placing her parents next to someone who seeks out such vile infectious creatures, Abramovic truly has a deep disrespect for her parents, verging on hate. One can almost feel the pain as he is pictured motionless for quite a while on a metal pole, naked and limp like a rag doll. The feeling of rawness may be felt, a feeling of deep discomfort - perhaps a feeling or emotion quite predominant in her earlier life with her parents.

Abramovic says that she always felt at one with nature and that living in the Balkans helped her to appreciate nature and its ruggedness even more. Therefore, probably, another reason for her shame of Yugoslavia was the manner in which its inhabitants have treated their environment and country. As economic development began to accelerate after the war, industrial plants manufacturing pollutant substances such as cellulose and ore - smelting began to litter the countryside, and nature suffered. Abramovics background makes a very interesting focal point for her work.

Abramovics work may be divided into three sections; 1) her earlier solo work which dated between 1973 - 1975, where her body was her prime source 2) her collaboration with Ulay, where both artists tried to abandon the gender and ego barriers that separated them. Their collaboration that began in 1976

would begin a twelve year relationship, until their final encounter in their performance piece The Great Walk (1990), where the two lovers met at the centre point of the Great Wall of China after walking approximately 2500 km to say their goodbyes, never to meet again 3) her third body of work which is still in production is designed especially for the participation of the viewer. These works are sculptural pieces where the artist wishes the spectator to come into direct contact with her work, with the hope of experiencing an out-of-this world feeling.

So why did Abramovic return to sculptural pieces? The simple answer is that she had exhausted all possible ideas and explored the limits of her body to this utmost and fullest. She could now begin to incorporate what she had learned from her performances into her sculptural work, endeavouring to share her experience of a higher state of consciousness with the willing public spectator.

In Battcock's and Nickas' book The Art of Performance, they pose the question in their introduction; "And what of the return of figurative painting in recent years, by both Artists once (or still) involved with performance and those who never were?"⁴ This statement is very relevant in the case of Abramovics work. Her latest body of work shows an obvious connection with performance in that the spectators are invited to come into contact with her pieces, to be able to

⁴ Battcock, Gregory and Nickas, Richard. The Art of Performance. E.P. Dutton, Inc. New York. 1984, P.XV.

experience another state of being, just as she has done in the past few years in her performances. According to Helena Kontova "painting has been transformed by absorbing elements of performance, installation art, and photography. Avant-garde art in the sixties and seventies was characterised by the use of extra-artistic objects (including the human body), accentuating their materiality and objectification, and was also characterised as pure representation (which in some cases, could be termed as a new form of show). Consequently, paintings in general and the paintings or works of ex-performers in particular tend to assume some of these characteristics"⁵

Abramovic's earlier solo works (1973 - 1975) are probably the most amazing of her performances; these will be discussed in detail in chapters three and four. Through these sequences of performances, which were based on pain, her work became most widely known.

⁵ Ibid.

ANT-POST

CHAPTER 2

Performance in the Seventies

Prior to becoming renowned for her work as a performance artist, Marina Abramovic began an artistic career that would prepare her for further development in her performance pieces. Abramovic, at the beginning of the seventies, had not yet broken away from her Eastern European environment and its influence:

"In Eastern thought the mind and body are indivisible. The aim is to achieve a harmonious balance between the two and, through gradual transformation, to reach a higher state of being commonly known as "enlightenment".

In order to transform, one must first empty the mind. For thirty years Marina Abramovic has used the techniques of emptying and transforming to create the conditions in which the transition of both the artist and the public into a different state of mind can occur"¹

Abramovic began with a series of projects which were concerned with emptying; these were to begin her artistic career. The first piece, shown in 1971, entitled Project - Empty Space was held in a small room where many large black and white images of Belgrade were projected onto plain white walls. As the sequence progressed more and more images of the city were removed until eventually only images of people were left in an open space. This was to be the first record of Abramovic's concern with empty spaces.

Following this project, but at a much later stage, Abramovic began her freeing

¹ Abramovic, Marina. Objects Performance, Video Sound. Museum of Modern Art, Oxford. Oxford. 1995. p21.

1251A
MATTPOST

series; Freeing the Memory (1975), Freeing the Voice (1975) and Freeing the Body (1976) were to mark more emptying processes where the artist and the public were, at the preparation stage, to enter another physical and mental level of consciousness. The 'Freeing' series were most remarkable live works. In Freeing the Memory, the artist was seated and recited a free flow tirade of words until there was nothing left to express. In Freeing the Voice, it took three hours of constant screaming for Abramovic to lose her voice and in Freeing the Body, the naked artist danced to the frenetic rhythms of an African drum for eight hours before her body gave in and collapsed in exhaustion.

Even though Abramovic used a wide variety of materials and ideas in her earlier 1970's pieces, she felt that these inhibited her and that she could not express herself to her full potential as an artist who had experienced so much in life that she wanted to share with the viewer.

1968 really marked the beginning of the decade of the seventies as regards the potential of performance art. Significant factors of the development of performance art emerge around this time. It was around this period that artists began to inflict torture on their bodies in order to produce thought. Artists such as Hermann Nitsch, Rudolf Schwartzkolger and Gina Pane were all significant figures in the performance art of pain around the early seventies. These ritualistic performers, around this time, were far more publically emotional and expressionistic than artists had ever been vocationally before and Abramovic was part of this new generation of artists. These slaughtering,

masochistic, self-inflicted pain performances were the first of their kind and so found it difficult to become accepted in society at the beginning. All these artists were of the similar opinion that these ritualized acts were a "means of releasing that repressed energy as well as an act of purification and redemption through suffering"²

We must remember that these artists were of a post-war generation so that this 'repressed energy' was a feeling that needed to surface after many years of being denied the chance while the people of the world endeavoured to rebuild their lives after years of disruption in World War 2.

Austrian artist Hermann Nitsch was probably most renowned for his ritualistic performances, where slaughtering and disembowelling animals was not an uncommon practice. Rudolf Schwartzkolger "created what he called 'artist nudes - similar to wreckage'; but his wreckage like self-mutilations ultimately led to his death in 1969."³ Gina Pane's self inflicted cuts to her body involved ~~incising~~ carving cuts with a razor blade. Like Nitsch, she believed that through torturing her body, this ritualized pain had a purifying effect on herself" Pane claimed that she got "no masochistic pleasure from my risks, but I get satisfaction of facing up to my fears and relinquishing inherited and to me false taboos and neuroses, revelation and education to a percentage of

² Goldberg, Roselee. Performance. Live Art 1909 to the Present. Harry N. Abrams Inc. New York. 1979. p106.

³ Ibid.

bystanders"⁴

Many performance artists around this time were of the same opinion, that ritualised pain had a purifying effect; Marina Abramovic certainly fits into this category. There is a large possibility that a great many of these artists followed each other's examples and influenced each other, just as in today's world where society tends to follow a fashionable trend. All of these artists aimed to "denounce determinism, taboos, obstacles to freedom and to the individual's expression, whether it belongs to social, or family, or other structures,"⁵ This is also a belief of Abramovics, as will be explained in chapter three. She believes that she is therapeutically helping her spectators to overcome their problems, no matter how trivial these may be.

The risk of infection, pain, torture, humiliation, even death and provocation of social structure have been some of the main risks taken by artists since 1969. Performance in the beginning really was an effort of a new form of a new communication. However, the only people who can experience this communication are these people who are present. Like some other forms of art or performance, one has to be present to experience its message. The reality of performance art and the shock of the events taking place is a much fresher way to communicate to the spectator the message that the artist wants to

⁴ Battcock, Gregory and Nickas, Richard. The Art of Performance. A Critical Anthology. E.P. Dutton, Inc. New York. 1984. p134.

⁵ Battcock, and Nickas, op.cit. p126.

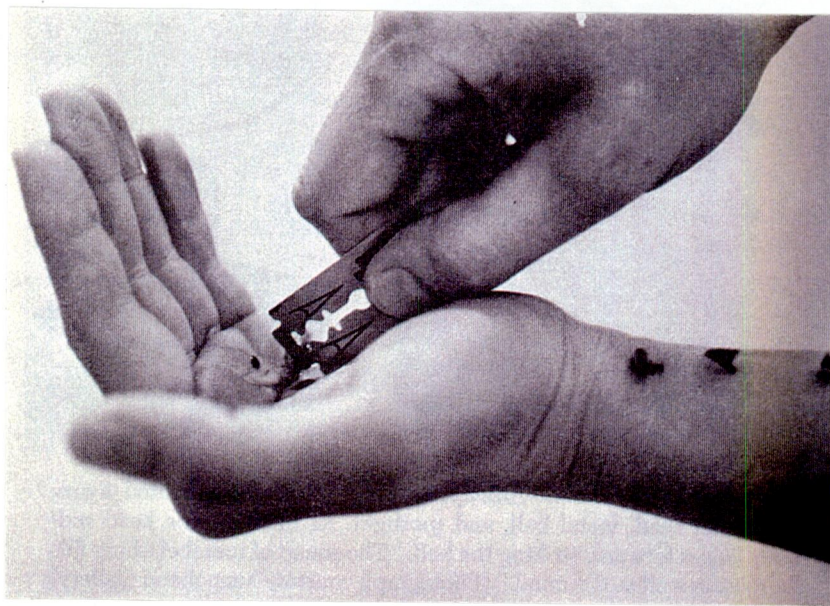


Figure 1

Gina Pane cuts an incision into the palm of her hand during a performance.



convey. Hermann Nitsch summed up performance art neatly when he said:

"The spectator (participant, player) is thrown into a more intensified aesthetic - mystic understanding of the surrounding world"⁶

Joseph Beuys was a German artist born in 1921. With his dramatic performances and lectures in an attempt to change public consciousness, he was to be a major influence on a later generation of performance artists in the Seventies, including Abramovic. It was not that Abramovic's work was similar to Beuys; but his concept of art and an open-minded view as regards the materials that he used appealed greatly to her. He was probably one of the first artists to use fat (in the form of lard) in his work which probably appeared totally ludicrous to many people then, but now can be seen used widely in many artists' works of today. Janine Antoni is one such artist. As in traditional fine art practice, Antoni chisels, moulds, casts and paints, except she does so with her body. Her body is her tool (just as it is for Abramovic). Her work Eureka (1993) involved the utilization of lard. In this piece she dips herself in a bath of lard until completely submerged and the lard is flattened over her. When her body and fat are removed, she mixes the fat with lye to make a large cube of soap with which to wash herself. This work of art tells a story. "It is about having a hunch or hypothesis which you want to prove or disprove, a sensual and intellectual perception about your body arrived at through

⁶ Kastenlanetz, Richard. On Innovative Performance. McFarland and Company, Inc., Michigan. 1994. p111.

experiment."⁷

Beuy's childhood in Kleve, adjacent to the Dutch border, was somewhat similar to Abramovics in that he did not have a particularly close relationship with his parents. In the strongly Catholic environment in Kleve in which he grew up, there was little room for tenderness. As Beuys once said himself, his relationship with his parents could not be described as close and he had to look after himself from an early age. He tried to free himself from this sad existence on several occasions, escaping at one stage with a travelling circus. He described his mother as strict and proper and his father as very reserved.

Beuys believed that there was no particular definition to art but that is was entirely related to the human individual. We cannot define art. Perhaps most individuals would think of paintings and clay sculptures as art, but then a great deal of people outside the art world cannot even begin to comprehend modern, contemporary art that uses other materials such as metals or plastic etc, so how can they even try to understand or come to terms with performance art.

Beuys always did the different thing, that is, using materials or performing eccentric works of art that perhaps would have been considered ludicrous in the 1950's and 1960's. In some of his performances, for example, he would

⁷ Findlay, Judith. "Press me, push me, Feel me, Find me."
Women's Art Magazine. Dublin. No. 64 May/June 1995.

wrap himself in felt, stand motionless in the one spot for hours, sweep a forest, organise political parties for animals, explain works of art to a dead hare, bandage a knife after he had cut his finger. Even though these performance excerpts were not similar to Aramovics performances, the concept underlying them is what influenced her work. Beuys' artistic materials were selected for their symbolic connotations as were Abramovic's performances selected for their symbolic connotations as regards events which took place in her past life. ✓

Beuys' concept of enlightenment is the key that links Abramovic to him, simultaneously influencing her. A quote that sums this concept up well is:

"It is apparent from Beuys' many public pronouncements that he wished to elevate perception, to lead his discipline into new avenues of heightened sensitivity - in short, to self-knowledge"⁸

⁸ Moffit, John F. Occultism in Avant-Garde Art. The Case of Joseph Beuys. University Microfilms Inc. Michigan. 1988. p108.

CHAPTER THREE

Pain, Body Mutilation and Audience Response in Performance.

Abramovic believes that western society is too fond of its many comforts and has not experienced ample pain. She believes that a fear envelops and characterizes the West, that fear being of pain. She believes that we are so afraid of being exposed to pain and death that we have a tendency to barricade ourselves from such physical experiences. "This," she believes, "is rendering us unable to apprehend reality and is therefore paralysing us."¹

Pain was the most predominant feature in the earlier works of Abramovic dating between 1973 - 1975. Very often she would torture herself until all pain was eliminated, until the endurance of the body seized up or until unconsciousness was inevitable. She would push her body to the utmost limits both physically and mentally in search of the path of "liberation". This path of 'liberation' was achievable through "enlightenment" which has already been discussed in chapter two. Abramovic felt a need to liberate her soul and, in order to do so, she needed to purify it through a series of confessional performances in front of a willing audience. Even though she suffered great pain in these earlier works between 1973 and 1975, they were, in a manner, therapeutic for her, gradually transforming her from the sufferer to the purified. Her performances helped her to overcome her pain and surpass all barriers

¹ Condon, "Marina Abramovic. Video and Performance".
Irish Museum of Modern Art. Dublin. September 1995.

MATTEOSI

MATTEOSI

until she built up a resistance to pain. She needed to overcome her own pain threshold in order to continue.

Every human needs to express his/her own feelings so as not to let them build up inside, and suffer alone. We need to reach out to someone else so that we can begin to understand and help each other.

"The language of pain is first and foremost an attempt to communicate to the person who is not in pain, in order to move them into action ... for example, the literature of Amnesty International and its first hand accounts of torture, the purpose of which is to get the reader to identify with the tortured, to be moved to end that suffering as if it were his/her own"²

This is an extremely relevant statement for Abramovic's process of creativity. Even, for example, if one sees a documentary on television conveying the lives of people who are poor or sick, our first reaction is that of overwhelming sorrow and pity. Often we feel the need to help in any way possible and this guilt pushes us to do something about it. However, that is exactly what these documentaries set out to do, to push the right buttons and drive us into action.

Abramovic's procedure could be compared to these documentaries and the spectator or audience could resemble the reader. It has happened on occasion that Abramovic's pain has been so great that she has been

² Reinelt, Janett G. and Roach, Joseph R.
Critical Theory and Performance. University of Michigan Press.
 Michigan. 1992.

completely humiliated or even lost consciousness. She obviously touches that hearts of some of the audience, as someone always intervenes in time and even perhaps saves her life. By reaching out to someone, we make sure that we do not suffer alone and, in Abramovics case, this is certainly true. Her tortured and suffering body becomes everyones concern in her performances.

"To say that one never suffers alone is not a simple cliché. The laws of identification and of communication between images of the human body make one's suffering and pain everybody's affair ... and it is at this level of thought that one must find an answer to so much suffering, violence and risk"³

Three such performances that required audience intervention were Rhythm O (1975), Rhythm 5 (1975) and The Lips of Thomas (1975). All of these performances were a kind of self-sacrifice in which Abramovic was both the sacrificer and the sacrificed; she offers herself up to the world and, in the case of Rhythm O, she literally offers herself up to the audience.

Rhythm O was first performed in 1974 where Abramovic appeared at her gallery opening in Naples along with a random crowd brought in off the streets. The performance lasted from 8pm to 2am. Abramovic remained motionless and the gallery director announced that the artist was the object and the audience could do to her exactly what they wished. There was a catch though, and that was that the audience could only use the 72 objects laid out on the table of Abramovic. By the end of the performance she was

³ Battcock and Nichas. The Art of Performance. A Critical Anthology. E.P. Dutton. Inc. New York. 1984. p132.

stripped, painted, cut, crowned with thorns and had ^{had} the muzzle of a loaded gun thrust in her hand and pointed towards her throat. It was at this point that the art world environment intervened and the performance ceased. Through pain, tears, blood and sweat Abramovic moved some of the members of audience to eventually help her.

Rhythm 5 (1974) comprised a large five-pointed star constructed of wood-shavings and soaked in petrol. Pacing around the construction, Abramovic threw a match that set it aflame and after cutting off her toenails and clumps of her long hair which she threw into each point of the star, she lay down in its centre. Not recognising the severity of the fire and starved of oxygen, she soon lost consciousness. Once again, she was removed by two members of the audience who realised that she was unconscious when her leg became aflame and she did not respond.

The Lips of Thomas (1975) is probably one of the most horrifying and gruesome of Abramovic's performances. In this performance, Abramovic was seated naked at a table where she first consumed a kilo of honey proceeded by a litre of wine. She then cut a five point star into her stomach with a razor blade and, crouching down on all fours, whipped herself until no pain was felt. Finally she lay on blocks of ice for thirty minutes until the audience intervened and removed her before she once again lost consciousness.

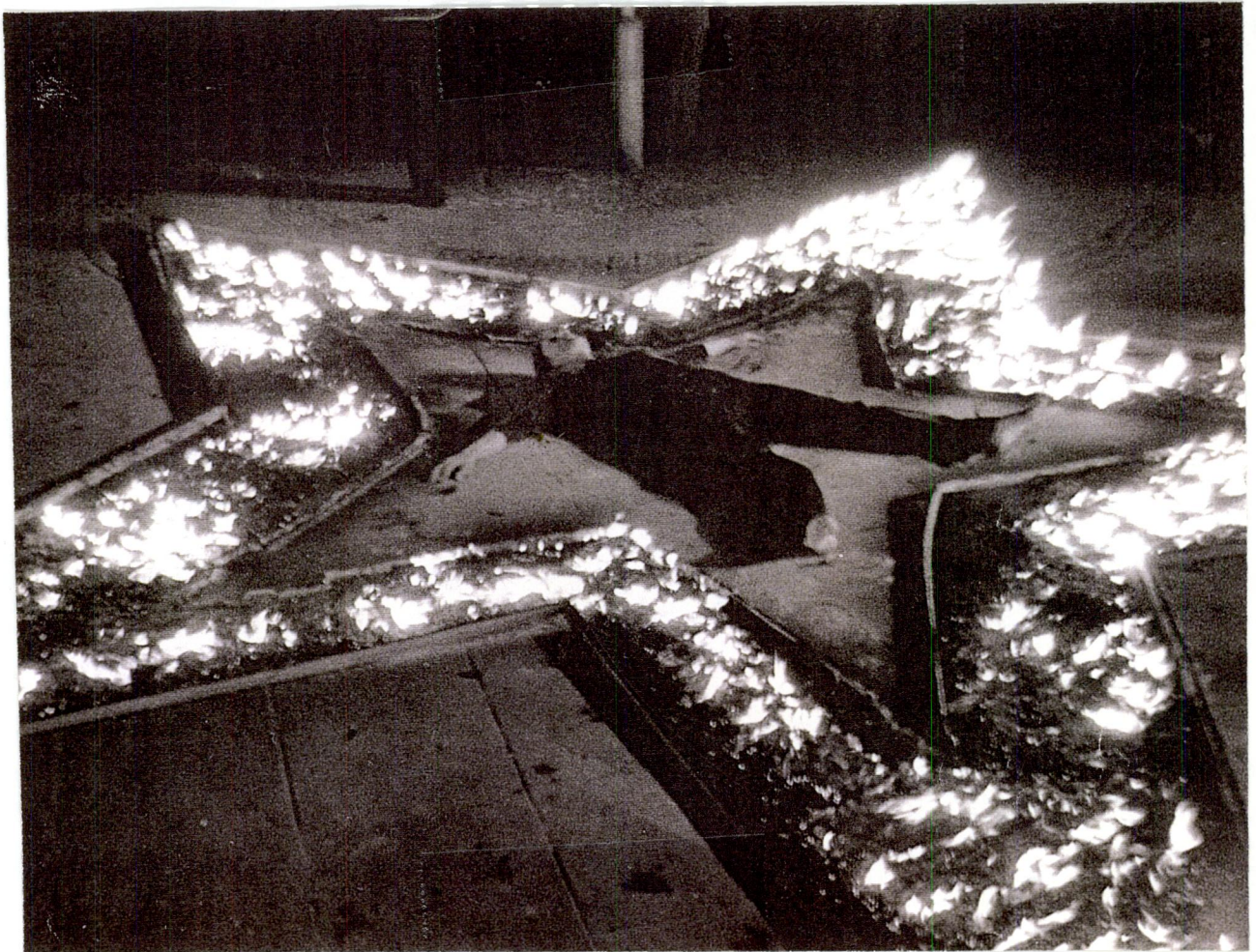


Fig. 2

Rhythm 5 (1974)

Abramovic becomes unconscious, unaware of the lack of oxygen.

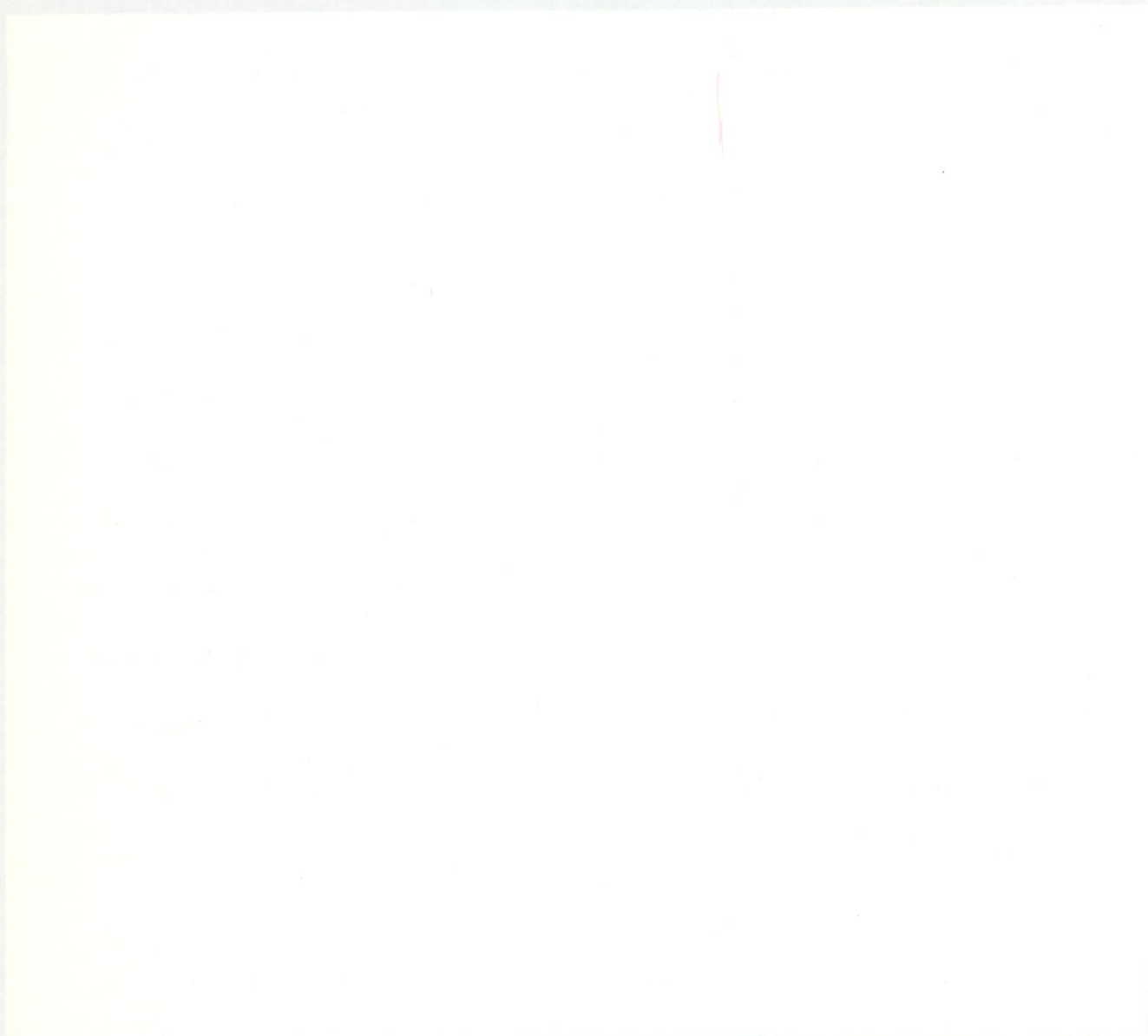




Fig. 3

The Lips of Thomas (1975)

Example of body mutilation endured by Abramovic.



Abramovic reaches out to the audience and seeks their attention, not to take pity on her but, as already discussed, to help her overcome her pain. Her works are therapeutic, not only for herself but also for the spectating audience. She is freeing herself from mental torture but also helping the audience to overcome their pain, no matter how trivial, through her example. In a way it could be said that she holds an 'umbilical link' with her audience.

In order to comprehend the pain suffered by Abramovic in her performances, one needs to first and foremost be familiar with her past life as already discussed. Between the strict ruling of a communist country, the violence of war and the pressures of family life, Abramovic experienced her fair share of misfortune and pain. One has to admire Abramovic. She "has pursued with impressively iron determination, her goal of breaking out of this falsely protective prison. Although this is something that only each individual can do for his/herself, that fact that she does it in the public context of art acts as a challenge to, and inspiration for, her audience:⁴

Fear became a learning tool which Abramovic explained quite simply:

"What you are afraid of is what you are supposed to do. When you do things you like you never change."⁵

Abramovic claims that she was never interested in shocking but that she was

⁴ Condon, op.cit.

⁵ Abramovic, Marina. Objects, Performance, Video, Sound. Museum of Modern Art, Oxford. Oxford. 1995. p11.

merely interested in experiencing the physical and mental limits of the human body and mind, which she wanted to share with the public. Through her example, one learns that suffering is inevitable before problems can be solved. Abramovic has said that transformation takes place in her performances, that she reaches a hypnotic state of mind. This is a necessity - where we can reach much higher limits of tolerance through bodies before we can begin the healing process.

Before performance became popular or, should it be said, before performance became accepted by the art world in the late sixties, art lovers had to become used to learning to 'read' non-verbal performances, and to translate symbolic context. In Abramovic's instance, to know her life is to understand her performances.

Abramovic has been attacked many times by a misunderstanding member of audience with a very limited knowledge or liking of art. On numerous occasions in her performances she has been mocked, humiliated or even physically attacked. This attitude boils down to the liking/disliking or performance or members the spectating audience. Some might perhaps be utterly offended or disgusted by her acts of self mutilation and mortification, perhaps regarding them as violent. Others who are more religious might believe that she is blasphemous or a mocker of religion in some of her performances where she takes on a 'saviour like' appearance or role.

Abramovic's passive body itself became a kind of relish object on to which desire, hatred and fear were projected as represented in the classic trial of mother, madonna and whore. This trial is evident in her preformance Rhythm 0, where a random selection of people were invited in off the streets to join in the preformance. This was a classic example of where the performance was intervened by art world constituency. The less knowledgeable or appreciative people in the world of art became very frustrated even angry with Abramovic's insistence on remaining still and carried out acts of violence on her, including crowing her with thorns cutting her flesh, pointing a loaded gun to her throat and even small acts of sexual abuse were practised.

ETA
09/12/09



Fig 4.

Rhythm 0 (1975)

A member of the audience thrusts the muzzle of a loaded gun into Abramovics hand, pointing it towards her throat.



Of course, different reactions would occur in different cultures. I would be of the opinion that in countries where a strict religious code is practised, that the reaction towards Abramovics work would be more likely to be feelings of revulsion and distaste.

It would be very interesting to have compared and carried out surveys on performances in different cultures, for example, how would people with a strict religious code have reacted? or how would the art world have reacted compared with people with an ignorance towards art? One must be reminded, though, that Abramovic was not the only artist to evoke such reactions. Let us now take a look at the contemporary French artist Orlan. Orlan is the artists' adopted name, derived from the religious figure of St. Orlan. Orlan has quite a lot in common with Abramovic, the major difference being that Orlan does not base her performances so much on life. Orlan's work has also been a topic of much controversy. Her radical performances attack the mystified role of woman as mother/madonna on one hand and, on the other hand, she uses female icons of power but at the same time documents female masochism.

In one of her first performances entitled Baiser de l'Artist (1977) Orlan draws the line between the innocent and the whore. She begins by selling her kisses for five francs. She is, in a way, a human vending machine.

Through surveys carried out after the performance reactions were very

777A
"ANTIPOLY"

entertaining. A clear line could be drawn between the art establishment and the unappreciative and misunderstanding onlooker. This is an example of the kind of record she evoked in a random selection of onlookers:

(A) Women who participated in the performance.

(1) One woman stroked my hair and said "you are very brave!"

(2) Another returned several times, and we had a drink together.

(3) Another woman insisted that her male companion kiss me.

(4) Another woman pulls back in horror when she feels my tongue in her mouth! What had she expected?.

(5) Another brings me a glass of champagne.

(B) Men who participated in the performance.

(1) One man gives me 100 Austrian shillings afterwards as a tip.

(2) Another sits down at my feet and will not get up.

(3) Another man kisses my nose.

(4) Another man takes my head in his hands.

(5) Another returns the next day with some poems which he has

dedicated to me.

- (6) Another man says "you are right, we are all prostitutes here; you spit it in our faces" (he is an artist).

(c) Various reactions from people who did not actively participate in her performances.

- (1) One man shouts '1 Franc for a kiss by a man!' (Several homosexual friends come forward and kiss him).
- (2) The next gallery owner threatens to call the police, he claims that my siren is disturbing him.
- (3) Another shouts angrily that I should move to the Place Pigalle or the Bastille (recognised haunts of prostitutes)
- (4) Many people are hesitant, many laugh.⁶

Looking through Orlan's latest series of documented images taken from her on-going performance "The Reincarnation of St. Orlan", which began in 1990 and finished in 1993, with the intention of 'beautifying' herself, the question that has to be asked is, 'Is she completely insane?' These horrifying images of Orlan being cut open in the operating theatre may cause feelings of distress and even nausea to many of us, causing us to close our eyes or even feel physically ill. In photographs documenting the operations, we see images of her as her skin is cut and raised from her skull on a surgeon's knife to the final

⁶ Branson, AA and Gale, Peggy. Performance by Artists. Art Metropole. Toronto. 1979. pp 255-257.

result of the healing process where her face is bruised - to be honest she may even perhaps look as if she has been the victim of a life-threatening accident.

What is the purpose of her so-called art process, if one could call it art? Once again, it poses the question what are the acceptable boundaries within art practice? What extremes are acceptable to the viewer? Some might argue that she advertises plastic surgery but Orlan explains quite simply - "Social pressures must not be allowed to overwhelm individual desires and self-portraiture"⁷

Her art is risk. She enjoys the excitement of risk even though the consequences could be fatal. Even though I find her work quite nauseating and ludicrous to look at initially, Orlan's underlying reasons for her series of documented works are quite similar to those of Abramovics, except that they are executed in quite different manners. Orlan once said that:

"For me art which is interesting is related to and belongs to resistance. It must upset our assumptions, overwhelm our thoughts, be outside norms and outside of the law. It should not be there to give us what we already know. It must take risks, at the risk of not being accepted, at least initially. It should be deviant and involve a project for society and even if this declaration seems very romantic, I say art can, art must change the world, for that is its' only justification."⁸

⁷ Adams, Parveen. The Image of Emptiness.
Routledge. London. 1996.

⁸ McKee, Francis. 'Orlan: Circa Art Magazine. No. 77 June. 1996.

Abramovic also believes in taking risks; she too has said that art is about taking risks.

Orlan says that she is trying to make her work as little masochistic as possible. Personally, I do not see how she could make it any more horrifying. She does not find these operations pleasurable but feels that everyone experiences this displeasing discomfort whether going to the dentist or doctor.

Orlan is a performer who, like Abramovic, feels that the spectating audience is very important. However, Abramovic's audience is present at her performances but Orlan's audiences watches all hers through television screens and documented images, as obviously their presence in the theatre could not be allowed. But the idea of the audience experiencing various emotions, from pain to nausea, is present. Orlan once said:

"I am sorry to make you suffer, but remember I am not suffering, except like you when I look at the images. Only a few kinds of images force you to shut your eyes; death, suffering, the opening of the body, some aspects of pornography for some people, and for others, giving birth.

In this case eyes became black holes in which the image is absorbed willingly or un-willingly, these images are swallowed up and hit, just where it hurt, without passing through the visual filters as if the eyes no longer had any connection with the head.

In showing these images, I propose an exercise which you probably enact when you watch the news on TV not to be fooled by images but to keep thinking about what is behind them"⁹

Throughout Orlan's operations the body of suffering is produced in the

⁹ Ibid.

ZETA
191200

spectator, if not in Orlan. The predominant effect of the series of images for most people, I can imagine, is horror - the effect of blood oozing from the surgeon's incisions etc. We, the viewers, are the ones experiencing the pain while Orlan experiences very little under anaesthetic. By going through all these operations, Orlan, on experiencing little pain, is however lifting her spirits. She is, in her eyes, making herself more beautiful to the world. Even if some of us might not agree with this, she herself will become more peaceful of mind.

Abramovic also suffers and, by going through a series of performances is helping herself to become more at one with the suffering of the world, is building up a barrier so as to banish the suffering of her past life - not present or future suffering. It is impossible for any human being to banish all pain, be it mental or physical, from their bodies for eternity. At the time of her performances, Abramovic transports her mind to a higher state of being, deleting all emotions of pain around her and simultaneously therapeutically helping herself. However she agrees that if she were at home and she perhaps cut herself through peeling a potato that she might cry with the pain. Deleting pain from life, therefore, has all to do with the power of the mind.

CHAPTER FOUR

Religion and Martyrdom

Greatly influenced by Joseph Beuys who was rooted in the Catholicism of the lower Rhine, Abramovic was also fairly closely involved with Christian symbolism. In the realm of applied religious art, she devised a series of performances representing redemption, sacrifice and martyrdom which can be seen throughout her earlier solo works dating between 1973 and 1975.

Many of these earlier performance contained a certain amount of religious connotations which will be discussed further on in this chapter. Words such as purification, healing and martyrdom all spring to mind. The biblical link in her performances could be an endeavour to convey her 'saviour-like' image to us; 'saviour-like' in that she wants to save us from too much suffering. Just as Jesus Christ died on the cross to save our souls, as Christians believe, Abramovic endlessly endures the pain she suffers in order to help us, as explained in Chapter Three.

In Marina Warner's book entitled Alone of All her Sex (1976)¹ she speaks of martyrs in her chapter 'Virgins and Martyrs'. Apparently, martyrdom was perceived as proving the faith of a victim of a person who had lived a life of impurity and who needed to physically suffer in order to bring themselves to

¹ Warner, Marina. The Myth and the Cult of the Virgin Mary. Alone of all her Sex. Weidenfeld and Nicolson. London. 1976.

martyrdom and prove that they were truly sorry for what they had done. In other words, she is saying that Christians were made aware of strengthening their souls through acts of persecution - similar to the process used by Abramovic. She is strengthening herself physically and mentally through self-torture which in a manner is an act of martyrdom on Abramovics' behalf.

But why should Abramovic feel as if she needed to suffer such pain? She is obviously endeavouring to strengthen herself. However, she has not lived a life of badness. Perhaps in the light of biblical stories, we would all be seen as impure, but in today's society what would make a person feel the need to make a martyr of him or herself? It all boils down to a subject already discussed. In the previous chapter which considers pain, this chapter explained how, by suffering, she is helping us, the viewer in a therapeutic process.

Let us now take a look at some of Abramovic's performances that could be regarded as containing religious symbolism. In her Biography (1994), Abramovic is simply recalling the memories of her childhood in a one stage performance. The performance lasts one and a half hours and is a combination of all the earlier performance, that is, solo performances (1973 - 1975) and her collaboration with Ulay, in which she told a story of her past. In the opening scene of Biography, Abramovic is suspended from the ceiling on a cross-like armature, as if descending from heaven just as Jesus Christ hung on the cross. In her hand she holds snakes, symbols of evil in the Bible,

and as she descends on to the stage she holds them away from her, as in a horrified manner. She looks all-powerful over the small slithering snakes - almost God-like. From behind her shines a bright light casting her in shadow so that only the outline of her figure can be seen. In this scene she looks almighty and certainly in control. Biography was Abramovics last performance before she began her new body of work, which is more sculptural. In this case, it explains her reason for feeling more in control as she has exhausted all her efforts at endeavouring to help us through her performances. She now has the power to continue her work through sculptural pieces, perhaps feeling more at one with herself.

In her performance, Rhythm O (1975), where Abramovic subjects herself to all sorts of cruelty, she is at one stage crowned with thorns, once again in a 'saviour-like' image. She is stripped, humiliated and debased in front of complete strangers but does not even attempt to escape. She must face up to the pain caused to her by these strangers. Jesus Christ experienced the exact same experiences before being crucified. He was also stripped and humiliated. Crowds mocked him but he also bore the consequences. This could certainly be described as an act of martyrdom, that is, suffering to help others.



Fig 5.

Biography (1993)

Abramovic strikes a 'God-like' pose

7ETA



The Lips of Thomas (1975) portrays more religious imagery. At the beginning of the performance, Abramovic consumes a kilo of honey followed by a litre of wine. Milk, as well as honey and wine, were considered holy and pure in biblical stories. Neither milk nor honey require any preparation but appear spontaneously in their full perfection. No rites of purification attend their consumption. As symbols of nature's goodness they are wild but also nutritious in themselves. Wine, however, does undergo processing at the hand of man and is another prime symbol of fertility and life. Wine is also used as a symbol of the blood of Christ in the communion rites of many cults.

In latest series of performances (1990 - 1993) the French Artist Orlan's, she underwent a series of cosmetic surgery operations. The idea of this was to achieve a total self-transformation using mythical female figures, as inspiration. Religion is also very much a part of her performances but not in a conspicuous way that would be recognised in a conventional or obvious way. This idea began in 1990 when Orlan decided to be 're-incarnated' by altering her face and body through a series of carefully planned and documented operations. Her new medium would be her own flesh, just as it has been for Abramovic. Under local anaesthetic, she was permitted to play the role of detached observer as well as patient.



Fig 6.

Orlan under local anaesthetic during one of her operations to improve her image.



ZETA
MATTPOST

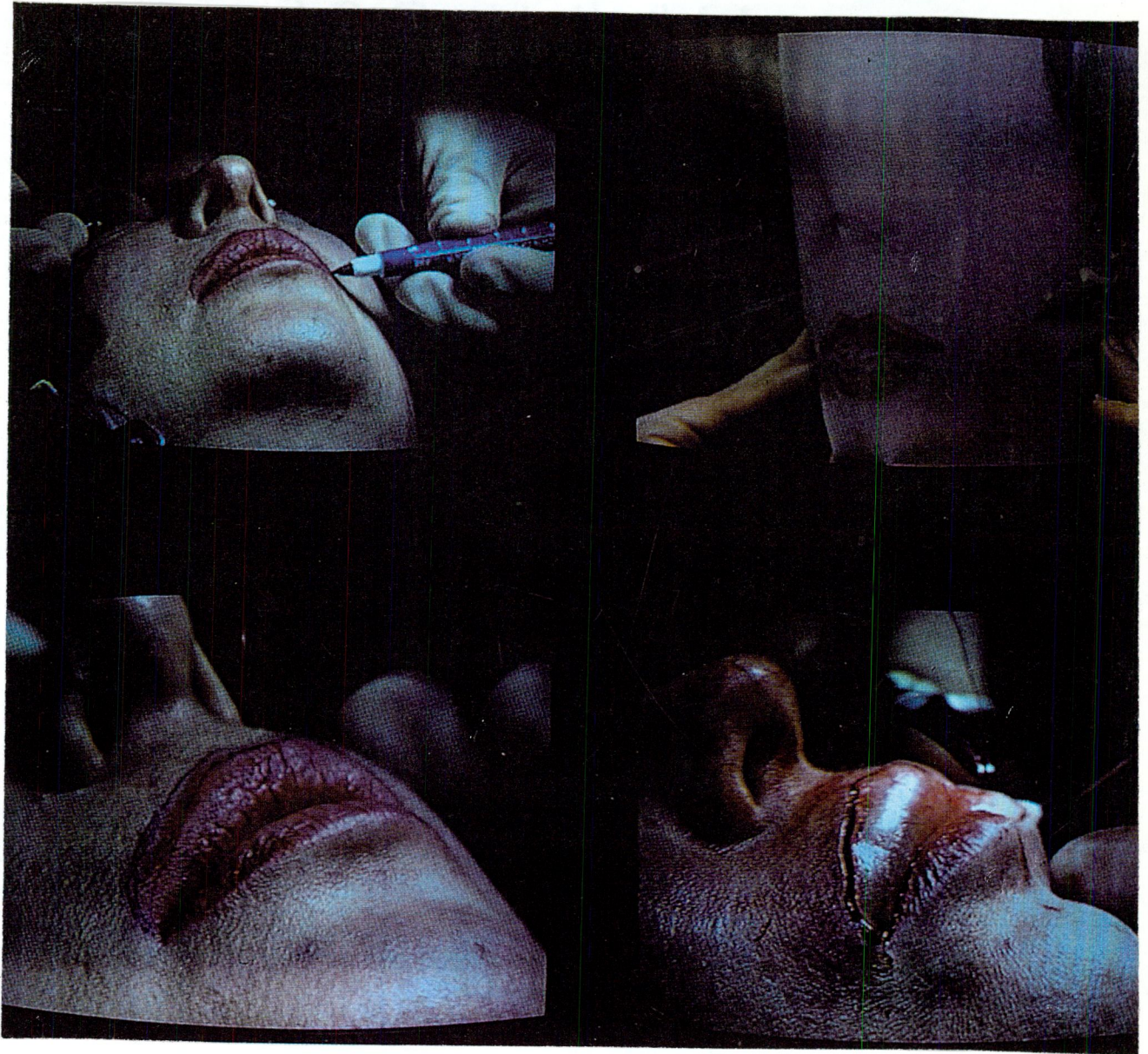
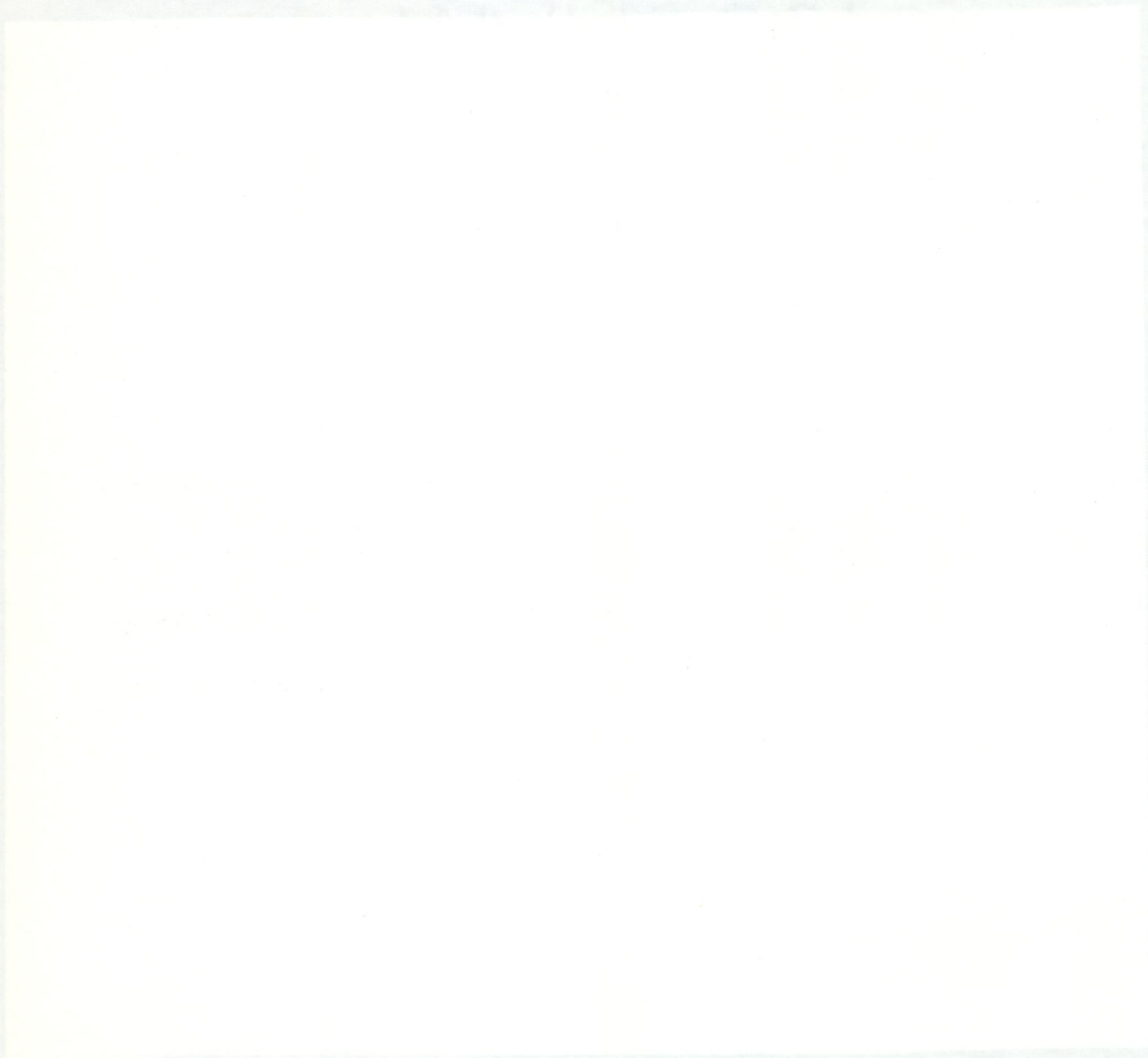


Fig. 7

Orlan under local anaesthetic in the operating theatre once again.



The sculpting and carving of her body sets up an intentional parallel between religious martyrdom and contemporary suffering for beauty through plastic surgery. Each operation is done while Orlan is fully conscious and dressed to the nines, reciting poetry and performing. The performances are documented through a series of photographs, which are dramatically lit. The surgeon's hands came into shot like the hands of God. Medical assistants are gathered around the bed like priests. Orlan is a sacrificial victim at the high altar of silicone.

A common aspect of Abramovic's earlier performances was the fact that she gave herself up as a self-sacrifice, particularly in the Rhythm O performance in 1975 in Naples where she became the victim of her audience. Is it not ironically co-incidental that just as Jesus Christ gave himself up to his people, as Christians believe he did, that both he and the artist at some stage in their lives were crowned with thorns?

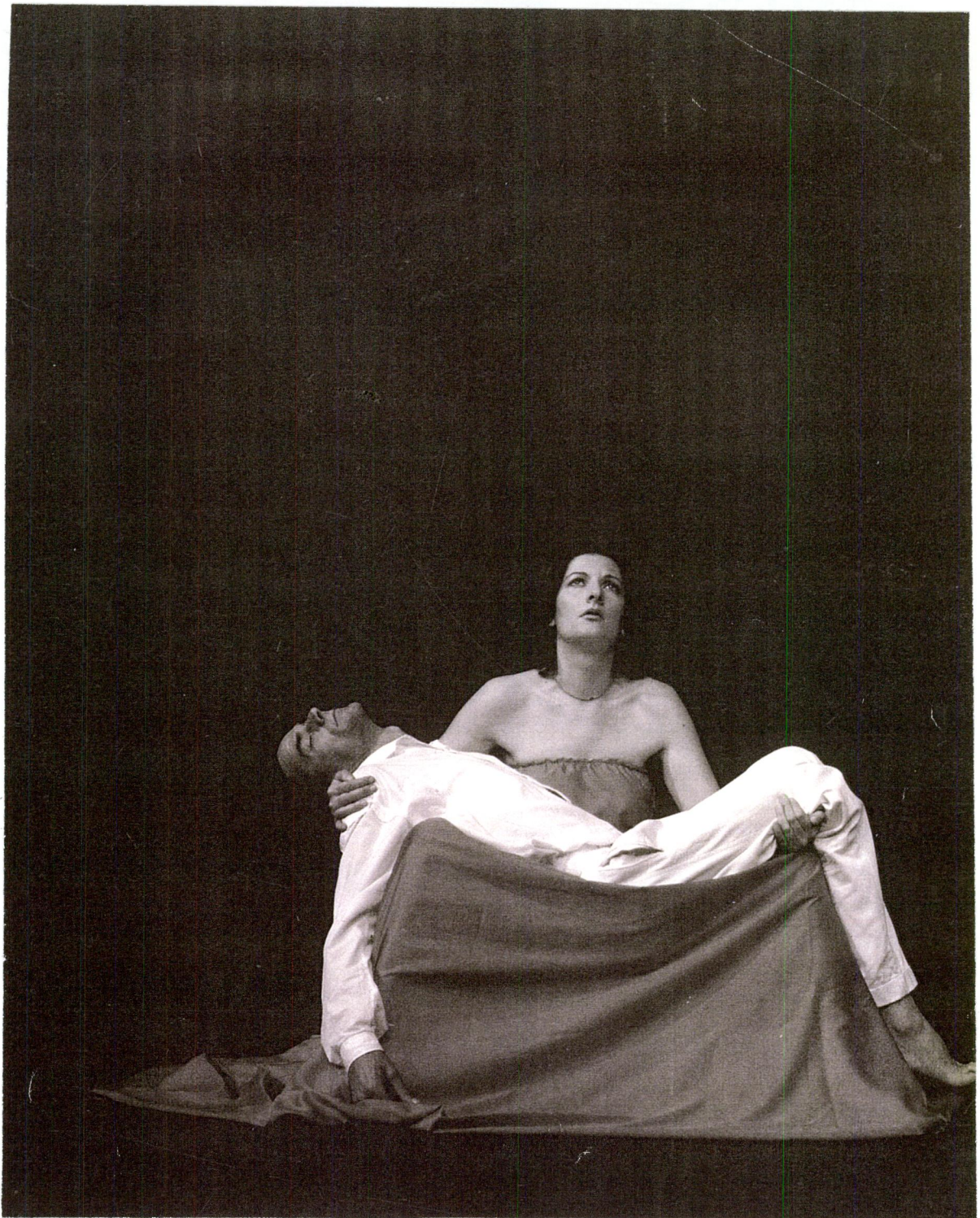


Fig 8

Abramovic & Ulay (1983), striking a 'Madonna and Child' pose

Peter





Fig 9

In "Striptease" (1977), Orlan depicts various mythological stages of a woman. Draped in the bed sheets of her dowry, she portrays a madonna, who gradually lets fall her drapes, as "heritage", until she finally reaches the stage of "femme striptease" - in other words the stage of prostitution, the whore.



CONCLUSION

And so to conclude, once again I must pose the question; is Marina Abramovic an attention seeker just wanting us, the viewers, to take pity on her, the poor tortured soul? The answer is most definitely no, as I hope have already proved in my thesis.

Abramovic could be described as a modern martyr suffering in her performances for the cause of the people. As already explained in chapter four, Christians have believed that in order to purify themselves from sin that they needed to endure and suffer pain and torture which was a strengthening process - a strengthening of the mind. Abramovic, like these early Christians is endeavouring to heal her wounds in a form of modern martyrdom perhaps? However she unselfishly wishes to therapeutically help the, spectating audience in the process by involving us and helping us to learn through her experience.

In this instance, as with the work of other artists, like Joseph Beuys, Nitsch and Pane, it may be said that art has a meaning, that it is not just present to beautifying the world. "The self-realisation of nature is the goal or inner meaning of art?"¹ Abramovic is endeavouring to become more at one with her mind and also trying to help the mind and bodies of many other people

¹ Abramovic, Marina. Objects, Performance, Video, Sound. Museum of Modern Art, Oxford. Oxford. 1995. p52.

WV 11021

WV 11021

WV 11021

WV 11021

through her work.

So is Abramovic a modern martyr? Yes, she is. And I hope that by this stage, I have made a clear case for this.

ILLUSTRATIONS

- Fig. 1. Performance by Gina Pane.
- Fig. 2. Rythm 5. (1974). Marina Abramovic.
- Fig. 3. The Lips of Thomance (1975). Marina Abramovic.
- Fig. 4. Rhythm O. (1975). Marina Abramovic.
- Fig. 5. Biography (1993). Marina Abramovic.
- Fig. 6. Performance by Orlan. 1992.
- Fig. 7. Performance by Orlan. 1991.
- Fig. 8. Performance by Ulay and Abramovic. 1983.
- Fig. 9. "Striptease" (1977). Orlan.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Books:

- Abramovic, Marina. Objects, Performance, Video, Sound. Museum of Modern Art, Oxford. Oxford. 1995.
- Adamovich and Ramet. Beyond Yugoslavia Politics, Economics, and Culture in a Shattered Community. Westview Press. Michigan. 1995.
- Adams, Parveen. The Image of Emptiness. Routhledge. London. 1996.
- Battock, Gergory and Nickas, Richard. The Art of Performance, A Critical Anthology. E.P. Dutton, Inc. New York. 1984.
- Bronson, A.A. and Gale, Peggy. Performance by Artists. Art Metropole. Toronto. 1979.
- Goldberg, Roselee. Performance. Live Art 1909 to the Present. Harry. N. Abrams Inc. New York. 1979.
- Kastenlanetz, Richard. On Innovative Performance. McFarland and Company, Inc. Publishers. New York. 1994.

- Moffit, John F. Occultism in Avant-Garde Art. The Case of Joseph Beuys. University Microfilms Inc. Michigan. 1988.
- Reinelt, Janette G. and Roach, Joseph R. Critical Theory and Performance. University of Michigan Press. Michigan. 1992.
- Stachelhaus, Heiner. Joseph Beuys. Abbeville Press, Inc. New York. 1987.
- Vivendi, Modus. Ulay and Marina Abramovic. Stedelyk Van Abbemuseum, Eindhoven. 1985.
- Warner, Marina. The Myth and Cult of the Virgin Mary. Alone of All her Sex. Weidenfeld and Nicolson. London. 1976.

PERIODICALS

- Condon. 'Marina Abramovic. Video and Performance.' Irish Museum of Modern Art. Dublin. September 1995.
- Fallon, Brian. 'Art Built on the Faultlines of Old Yugoslavia.' The Irish Times. Dublin. September. 20. 1995.
- Findlay, Judith. 'Press Me, Push Me, Feel Me, Find Me.' Womens Art Magazine. Dublin. No. 64. May/June. 1995.
- Hirschhorn, Michelle. 'Artists on the Post-Human age of Mechanical Reincarnation.' Versus. No. 3. 1994.
- McKee, Francis, 'Orlan'. Circa Art Magazine. No. 77. June 1996.
- Reitmair, Heidi. 'I do not want to look like ...' Women's Art Magazine. Dublin. no. 64. May/June 1995.

