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Towards an Ecological Paradigm - The Work of Marina Abramovic

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## Introduction

I only want to produce a new consciousness and point out exactly what treasures we must protect. I want to demonstrate the unbelievable construction of our planet, point out its sources of energy, and how, with a new consciousness, we can learn to rearrange our body and soul within this structure, making ourselves into a true location of our own selves. (Marina Abramovic in Drathen, 1993, p.227)

Motivated by the critical state of western society's imbalance with nature Marina Abramovic started making *Transitory Objects* in 1988 to offer a set of socioenvironmental values to counter the current planetary crisis. Restoring a balance demands an individual and collective redefinition of identity and values, of the present cultural and individual mindset that has completely separated from spiritual roots and natural resources. Rooted in capitalism and patriarchy, the western paradigm is solely focused on rationality and control while spirituality and emotions are regarded as irrational or inferior opposing forces. By inherently compelling an audience to physical and emotional experience Abramovic's *Transitory Objects* are intended to aid the urgently required process of reconnection in order to achieve a unified identification of the individual with universal natural principles. This emphasis placed on intended processes of transformation in Abramovic's work reveals the shamanic nature of her artistic approach. Chapter one will introduce her objects in relation to this pivotal aspect of her work.

Born in Belgrade in 1946, Abramovic has created paintings, sound installations, videos, photographs, performances and sculptural objects , both singly and collaboratively, during her artistic career over the past thirty years. The project of *Transitory Objects* seems to mark a break with the earlier work for which Abramovic is best known, her performances. The objects appear to be solid manifestations as opposed to the ephemerality of her performance work. In contrast to the often violent and aggressive action in the performances, the objects demand non-movement and radiate an atmosphere of silence and rest.

Abramovic's former work and her statements enhance the experience of her objects by offering insight into the underlying concept; a melange of the artist's own experience and ancient esoteric practices. As the objects are intended to engage an audience physically and thus try to initiate mental change, an investigation of Abramovic's previous work in terms of her personal development and her self-



understanding that has always been closely connected to bodily experience appears particularly important when tracing the objects' sources. Although she is a multimedia artist I will concentrate on her solo performances (1973-1976) and her collaborated performance work with her former partner Ulay (1976-1988) in chapter two, as this part of her work has given the main impulses for the concept of the *Transitory Objects*.

Despite this apparent coherence in her work, I will, on the other hand, show how the objects actually mark an immense shift in Abramovic's consciousness. Her early preoccupation with the self in her intense exploration of the mind-body relationship has made way for an embracing global attitude. The Transitory Objects are a manifest expression of the artist's connection to global energy flow and thus the fundamental underlying principles of development and decay. Abramovic gradually achieved this form of identification and tuning of body and mind through long processes of learning and challenging herself which are documented in her earlier work. Abramovic's work has always been inextricably linked to her biography and perception of identity. It can be regarded as the documentation of a journey into the depths of the self investigating the relationship between mind and body as well as her spiritual relations. Due to this close connection between self-understanding and artistic expression that actually blurs the line between art and life, the objects, in their striking difference from the previously employed medium of performance, come to reflect this change in self-understanding which will be portrayed in chapter three.

Abramovic's global understanding is an embracing, unifying approach similar to an understanding of the ecological crisis as the macrocosmic reflection of other pivotal contemporary social and political problems, which are interwoven in a widely ramified pattern of cause and effect. Chapter four is concerned with a selection of the far-reaching consequences and implications her concept evokes, such as perceptions of culture and difference. The complex global situation thus denies to be tackled in isolation but demands to become an "ecological imperative" (Gablik, 1992, p.49). Abramovic regards her work as supporting the emergence of this 'new' totalizing theory or myth.

Finally, her approach opens up the question of the therapeutic benefits of her art apart from the private level for herself as portrayed in previous chapters but for an audience as intended with the *Transitory Objects*. Since this question implies a



summarising and evaluating view it will be explored in my conclusion. Regarding the complexity of the global crisis an individual's approach only seems to be able to function as a model, indicating possibilities and a direction. Apparently, the individual vision must remain partly contradictory and ambivalent in a surrounding that does not support the intended transitional development.



## <u>Chapter 1</u> <u>Transitory Objects - the Shamanic Approach</u>

Marina Abramovic's *Transitory Objects* are not sculptures in a traditional sense as they demand the audience's participation to be complete. Concise instructions for the use are provided.

The block of objects mainly consists of two large projects: *Transitory Objects, Boat Emptying/Stream Entering* (1988-90) which requires the participant to connect her or his body with different minerals mounted either on furniture-like sculptural pieces made of iron or copper or directly on the wall. Depending on the piece the participant is either lying (Green Dragon, fig.1, p.9), standing (White Dragon, fig.2, p.10) or sitting down (Red Dragon, fig.3, p.11). The objects' titles are derived from the Chinese tradition of meditation that Abramovic began to research in 1975 among other eastern philosophies and rituals that aim to raise the participant into a heightened state of self-awareness. Except for the *Black Dragon* series (fig.4, p.12) that instructs the public to press their head, heart and sex against different minerals mounted to a wall while standing, the participant's whole body is elevated above the floor in all other pieces.

This loss of contact became the main theme in the second project, the *Departure* series (1991). As the *Shoes for Departure* (fig.5, p.13) are made of large pieces of amethyst they suggest an inner instead of a physical departure.

Despite their aesthetic quality, the soothing beauty of the minerals' surface and colour, the objects deflect the emphasis placed on the gaze and visual representation above other perceptive abilities in western culture. The instruction for the audience to close the eyes emphasises Abramovic's intention to make the objects appeal to other senses. The objects succeed both in being conductors of unusual sensory experience and in facilitating public use because of the employment of the exotic sensuality of the minerals in combination with the familiarity of the furniturelike pieces. The compact and plain design of the objects thus stresses the idea of a space for rest and silence in avoidance of distraction.









White Dragon, 1990 fig.2





Red Dragon, 1990 fig.3





Black Dragon, 1990 fig.4





Shoes for Departure, 1991 fig.5



Silence and long motionless remaining in one position are the meditative techniques which are supposed to enable the public to "depart" to a world beyond ordinary states of awareness. Non-movement neglects external action and allows concentration on inner processes. In order to reach a state of receptivity this phase of concentration means "emptying the boat", a picture that illustrates the participant's need to abandon distracting or even cluttering thought. The minerals not only prepare the participant for an inner journey but they might also create an energy dialogue with a person receptive and sensitive enough to perceive vibrations beyond rational grasp. The first project's title implies the aim at a connection to fundamental underlying forces, the natural 'stream' or flow of things, through entering into this energy dialogue.

Among the objects that can be experienced by the public are some for nonhuman use. *Chair and Table for Non-Human Use* (1992, fig.6, p.15) consists of two chairs and a table on which two glasses of water are placed. The pieces of furniture which are smaller than adult-size have their legs extended with pieces of quartz crystal. The object can be regarded as an invitation to elements of non-human nature to join. It illustrates the artist's belief in the presence of spiritual forces and their fundamental importance to humans.

In his essay *The Shaman Is A Gifted Artist* writer and critic Mark Levy turns the phrase when establishing bonds between modern artists and characteristics of the shaman in tribal society. One might add Marina Abramovic to the range of artists he mentions who have come to "replace the priest and the monk as an intermediary between ordinary and nonordinary states of reality for their audiences" (Levy, 1988, p.54).

Indeed, in a recently published scrapbook Abramovic herself refers to artists such as Yves Klein or Joseph Beuys as influences of her work (Abramovic, 1995, unpaged). Beuys' description of his shamanic concept reveals certain similarities:

> I take this form of ancient behaviour as the idea of transformation through concrete processes of life, nature and history. My intention is obviously not to return to such earlier cultures but to stress the idea of transformation and substance. (Beuys in Tisdall, 1979, p.28)

The artwork does not imitate the art of traditional shamanic cultures but is a new form of expression which recalls shamanic content in a context appropriate to





Chair and Table for Non-Human Use, 1992 fig.6



contemporary life. *Crystal Cinema 2* (1992, fig.7, p.17) instructs the participant to watch the 'film', a large crystal mounted to the wall like a screen. It becomes the focus of attention that does not concentrate on external action but on processes beyond visual perception which demand great sensitivity to be perceived. There is no rational story line to follow in this 'different' cinema experience. The alienation effect due to the replacement of the familiar and the expected initiates an experience beyond the ordinary and stresses the need for reintegration of neglected forces. This different sensual stimulation is ultimately meant as an inspiration to renew the audience's awe and respect for nature.

Shamanic practices are employed by both, Abramovic and Beuys, among other artists with a similar approach, to effect processes of mental transition and social change.<sup>i</sup> For Abramovic these processes are felt urgently vital in a global situation of environmental emergency. Like Beuys, she identifies the limited ways of materialistic and rationalistic thinking and the seemingly absolute Cartesian alienation of mind from matter as the root causes of the ecological crisis (Abramovic in Drathen, 1993, p.235).

In concentrating on spiritual, non-rational processes, shamanic practices as manifested in the objects seem appropriate to initiate a change of mindset on an individual and collective level in a society addicted to rationalism and restore a balanced relation between the traditionally opposed and polar forces.

Abramovic believes that a full awareness of the present crisis and the goal of reconnection can only be achieved by a form of spiritual therapy that focuses on the individual's own bodily experience (Abramovic in Drathen, 1993, p.227). The body is placed at the centre of the western nature - culture division and heavily implied in the attitude of dualist thought that she rejects. As soul and mind are regarded as inextricably linked to the body instead of existing as separate entities healing processes that involve and focus on physical experience function as the key to morality. In denying a purely intellectualised approach to the artwork, the underlying ideas are consequently felt to be more effective in an energy instead of a verbal dialogue.

Abramovic's underlying intention to initiate in her audience transitional mental processes in relation to the present global crisis is particularly apparent in *Wounded Geode* (1994, fig.8, p.18). The object becomes the concrete symbol for a complex problem. Removed from its natural context and served on a large table of a





Crystal Cinema 2, 1990 fig.7




Wounded Geode, 1994 fig.8



modern western design, the amethyst illustrates the vital function of natural resources by replacing food at this dinner for two. Moreover, as it is 'wounded', hurt and sacrificed, it evokes notions of guilt. The invited audience is indirectly asked to "reflect on the wounds we inflict on our planet" (Abramovic in IMMA, 1995, unpaged).

Entering a different state of mind is the first step in a shamanic healing process which is often aided by enchanted materials. In alchemical work crystal was seen as the manifestation of the purified soul freed from paralysis (Marshall, 1992, p.157). The *Dragon* series (fig.1-3, p.9-11), a name that connotes a disguise of nature, thus suggests that the only possibility of reaching this state lies in the identification of the human body and soul within the realm of nature. The used materials symbolise the energy stores of the earth while the participant's body represents an extension of this vital organism.

The desire for healing, wholeness and psychic discovery in western cultures is particularly evident in the increasing popularisation of ancient transformation practices such as meditation or the growing belief in the benefits of crystal healing. In creating the objects Abramovic parallels the notion of the shaman as a spiritual guide or teacher who helps others through the rites of initiation and transition by seeming to introduce his or her disciples to a new experience of higher levels of understanding. The shaman's "job in tribal society is to have visions in a trance state and record these visions in poetry, song and visual arts for the spiritual and therapeutic benefit of the community" (Levy, 1988, p.54).

The difference between the modern artist and the shaman is that the tribal shaman is elected for his or her outstanding abilities to initiate processes of healing and transition. As Levy points out: "The shaman does not feel alienated from the rest of the society, his or her differences are utilised as an accepted role" (Levy, 1988, p.54). Yet difference or Otherness is disrespected in western, capitalist culture. It is often regarded as a undesirable and dangerous phenomenon outside of the dominant model. On the other hand, the transgressive nature of otherness is often turned impotent in the process of assimilation or integration into the 'mainstream'. In denying the possibilities of therapeutic change instigated by Others, society accommodates its status quo.

While for shamans "retribution can occur, especially if they overstep or lose control, thus failing in the claims and limitations of their status" (Dissanayake, 1988,



p.138), questions of authorisation and justification regarding projects that aim to realise utopian visions of a single individual remain problematic in a society that idealises individual freedom and autonomy.

Abramovic's aim at transition towards an ecological paradigm has farreaching implications for the whole structure of society. As it demands fundamental change it appears as a concept apparently completely hostile to western society. On the other hand, the objects remain within the official setting as a part of museum culture and thus seem to inevitably compromise their transgressive nature.

A further investigation of these problems evoked by the ambiguous role of the shamanic eco-artist in contemporary society will be made by first looking at Marina Abramovic's process of individuation and then at her perception of identity in relation to society as the notion of the artist as a shaman implies a concept of identity rather than a mere profession since it closely links spheres of private life and artistic expression.



## <u>Chapter 2</u> <u>Initiation</u>

Just like a shaman who can only teach and provide what he or she already owns or knows, the *Transitory Objects* confirm that Marina Abramovic seems to have reached a point in her career or journey where she is able to transform her own experience into an offer to teach fellow-pilgrims.

Losing one's self in order to find one's self is an old shamanistic teaching principle also used in all kinds of modern therapeutic methods relating to psychotherapy. Driven by pain, disruption or distress and longing for change, the psychotherapeutic patient sets out on a spiritual journey or personal quest under the guidance of a "contemporary guru" (Kopp, 1972, p.1). Present patterns of behaviour and thought are questioned and deconstructed in order to 'rebuild' the self with newly gained insights.

Losing the self or one's ego in order to enter one's own Other is the recurring therapeutic theme in Abramovic's Transitory Objects with the intention to reharmonize the participant with formerly neglected non-rational aspects of her or his psyche. This concept can only be implemented effectively if the shamanic guide, the artist, has already experienced it. Abramovic's early solo performances dealt with these self-healing processes. Her objects can be seen as her recorded shamanic visions while the ritual activity that, in a metaphorical sense, brought them about was performance art: "Performance was the form enabling me to jump to that other space and dimension" (Abramovic in Pijnappel, 1994, p.49). Marina Abramovic's entry and access to 'other' dimensions first occurred during her early solo performances. In this body of work she constantly sought the extreme points of her existence, explored her boundaries. Abramovic describes this searching as leading her to "a mental jump to another state of mind" (Abramovic in Goldberg, 1995, p.12). As in shamanic training her direct engagement with fear was used as a 'learning tool' to challenge her limits and thus dissolve her ego-barriers: "What you are afraid of is exactly what you are supposed to do. When you do things you like, you never change" (Abramovic in Goldberg, 1995, p.11). In the process of learning and personal growth, facing and overcoming fear is the main step towards acquiring a clarity of mind (Kopp, 1972, p.140).



The notion of preparation for the later works is further illustrated in the performances in terms of mental training, discipline, courage and perseverance which are striking characteristics of a shaman. The presence of an audience further ritualises Abramovic's emotionally charged and transformative performances. Ritual practices in traditional society often aim at the mental state variously described as ecstasy, trance, dissociation or the "other dimension".

In *Freeing the Body* (1975, fig.9, p.23) the rite is aided by drummed rhythms. Marina Abramovic uses the beat to push her body to its physical limits to experience an empty state of mind, similar to the function of the shaman's drum that induces a trance state in which the body is mentally left to ascend to spiritual worlds in order to gain information. Abramovic's concentration on physical experience is thus aided by a mask she wears to cover her eyes in order to avoid distraction. The performance ends in a state of complete exhaustion after eight hours of dancing.

While the element of sound had been the main component in the installations and environments Abramovic created until 1973, rhythm is employed in the performances to conjoin mental and physical capacities. Mind and body here are not opposed dualistic principles but inextricably linked. As the rules in her rite-like performances are self-imposed, the pain self-inflicted, Abramovic's mental and physical limits are pushed at the same time.<sup>ii</sup>

In her first performance *Rhythm 10* (1973, fig.10, p.24) she stabs between the fingers of her outstretched left hand with ten different knives in succession at great speed, changing knives every time she cuts herself while recording the knives' sound. In an act of immense concentration she then repeats the preceding performance while playing back the recording.

The employed principles parallel traditional meditation techniques as in Zen-Buddhism which Abramovic discovered in 1968. This practice aims to achieve selfdisciplined freedom and enlightenment by exacting strict discipline on enacting rituals that challenge the individual's endurance and fears. Zen-Buddhist thought later became manifested in the *Transitory Objects* through the principle of spiritual equality, i.e. an understanding that everybody is equally capable of achieving enlightenment. The realisation that an enlightened state of mind cannot occur through another's power explains the object's focus on individual experience. Instead of being a shamanic intermediary between spiritual forces and the human





Freeing the Body, 1975 fig.9







Rhythm 10, 1973 fig.10



world, Abramovic's role is consequently rather that of an exemplar or teacher who guides her audience and initiates the individual experience.

## 2.1. The Cultural Un-Making

In order for transition and change to occur the mind has to be emptied. This necessity to abandon a certain internalised mindset and culturally accepted and learned behaviour and influences was the aim in a lot of Abramovic's early performances. Liberation is the theme in the series of *Freeing* performances that imply a state of purity as the result of an exhausting emptying process. *Freeing the Voice* (1975, fig.11, p.26) ended when Abramovic could scream no more, *Freeing the Memory* (1975, fig.12, p.27) when words ceased entering her mind. The individual voice, memory and body here represent sites of cultural inscription and conditioning.

Bojana Pejic describes Abramovic's unravelling of cultural coding in *Freeing the Body* (fig.9, p.23):

When she moves her body to a beat that belongs to a culture marked as 'other', she de-instrumentalizes a body that has learned to dance to a 'melody'. (Pejic, 1993, p.27)

Aware of the transformations of the individual body through its insertion into society Abramovic visualises processes of physical and mental liberation, self-alteration and deconditioning. The portrayal of her process of emancipation and individuation through body art stresses the idea of the body not only as the site of one's identity but also as the site of individual power and control that is equally important for human agency since it constantly identifies the artist with her physical existence. The selfhealing implications of her performances thus promised a way to liberate her existence of inherited and culturally encoded social influences in order to follow a chosen way. The conception of her embodiment in ways denied in western culture expresses her rejection of a rigorous mind-body split in favour of a holistic view that aims to delete the alienation from spiritual roots.

Aramovic's search for a different consciousness beyond ideological manipulation reflects cultural and social restrictions that were particularly influential in post-war Yugoslavia and in her family which Abramovic continued to live with until the age of 28.<sup>iii</sup> Awareness was the first step on the path to liberation. With a father as a war-hero partisan and general and the mother as a partisan major and subsequent director of the Museum of Art in Belgrade, growing up in a family



Freeing the Voice, 1975 fig.11





Freeing the Memory, 1975 fig.12

1



that engaged in rebuilding the young socialist state not only meant a political aware adolescence but also a receptivity towards the general spirit of radicality and change among students and artists in the western world of the late sixties. Abramovic became a member of the Communist Party in 1966, but disappointedly left soon afterwards. The particular "tendency towards deeply emotional and intimate confessions in visual art" (Denegri in Iles, 1995, p.21) in Belgrade at that time stems from its history as a former centre for Dada and Surrealism and thus corresponds to the need "to re-establish the importance of focus or essence in art" (Elliott, 1995, p.68) that prevailed in the art of Beuys and other Fluxus artists or *arte povera* associates, many of whom visited the city in the late sixties and early seventies.

In Abramovic's performances her cultural heritage of an "unappreciated society" (McEvilley, 1995, p.52) often appears in the form of symbols. Symbolism also forms an integral part of shamanic transition rituals. The five-pointed star as the symbol for the Communist Yugoslavia is set on fire in *Rhythm 5* (1974, fig.13, p.29). Fire is both a destructive and a purifying medium that illustrates Abramovic's attempt to cleanse herself of inherited thought patterns and values. The notion of cleansing and transition is also stressed in the act of cutting and burning her hair and her finger and toe nails before placing herself inside the burning symbol.

In *Lips of Thomas* (1975, fig.14, p.30) Abramovic first ate a kilo of honey and drank a litre of red wine. She then cut a five-pointed star into her stomach skin and started to whip herself. When she could no longer feel any pain she lay on blocks of ice for thirty minutes. The self-imposed five-pointed star as a bleeding mark of her body hence carries a different connotation that Beuys once described: it can be interpreted as a symbol for dynamics in movement and thus creation. As it can be drawn with a single line it is not a dialectic symbol and aims beyond dualist principles (Beuys in Harlan, 1986, p.123).<sup>iv</sup>

By seeking the extreme points of her existence, Abramovic can conceive of herself as a complete entity of mind and body. Neither one is inferior to the other, they are equally important and interdependent.

Although the preoccupation with herself as an individual reflects her rejection of any collective dogma, it, nevertheless, can be read from a feminist perspective. In *Art Must Be Beautiful, Artists Must Be Beautiful* (1975, fig.15, p.31) she states her rejection of stereotyped images, beliefs and generalisations by





*Rhythm 5*, 1974 fig.13





Lips of Thomas, 1975 fig.14





Art Must Be Beautiful, Artists Must Be Beautiful, 1975 fig.15



destroying her face and hair while repeating the performance's title. Bojana Pejic points out that in her performances Abramovic "was and is continually un-doing constructed femininity" (Pejic, 1993, p.28).

Although Abramovic's artistic reputation mainly rests on the aspect of selfinflicted pain and violence in this block of work, the main reason for her to perform in front of an audience was not to shock but to make use of the energy dialogue that evolves (Abramovic in Pejic, 1993, p.29). The enactment of violence has been a crucial feature in a lot of body art in recent decades, such as the performances of Vito Acconi or Chris Burden, for example. Ellen Dissanayake proposes that such violent behaviour produces a sense of ecstasy akin to the one felt in ritual ecstasy: "a new consciousness, a higher degree of awareness, becomes present, a new self more extensive than the first" (Dissanayake, 1988, p.139) and that it is particularly for this reason that such violence is enacted by the artists.

However, the possibility of self-liberation and the undoing of repressive influences by the individual pursuit of freeing one's body has repeatedly been doubted, for example by Bakhtin, Sartre and Barthes (Jefferson, 1989). The goal of wholeness cannot be individually achieved since the process of individuation is a process of differentiation from an Other. The self is always dependent on the Other's perspective to be constituted as a whole (Jefferson, 1989, pp.152-154).

In this context, the period of collaboration with the performance artist and photographer Ulay Laysiepen in which the relations between real 'external' Others are explored seems like the logical consequence of the egocentric focus in her solo performances. Ultimately, the early solo performances illustrate the relationship between the mind and its counterpart, the body, and thus the relation to the internal Other, the unconscious, but lack a strong enough dialogic relation in order to achieve a kind of wholeness. Abramovic's symbiotic collaboration with Ulay reflects identity not as a self-contained concept but as being permeated by relationships. The existential struggles Abramovic grappled with as an individual are thus pushed "one step further" (Abramovic, 1995, unpaged) due to their representation in the form of two interrelating individuals.



## 2.2. Self and Other (1976-1988)

In Plato's *Symposium* Aristophanes 'reveals' mankind's 'true' nature: in his view there once used to be "a being which was half male and half female" that, in arrogantly overrating its abilities, failed in reverence to the gods and was therefore split in two. The two halves' fate was to desperately yearn for each other and to hope that if they showed they had learned their lesson, the god of love "will one day heal us and restore us to our old estate, and establish us in joy and blessedness" (Plato, 1964, p.25).

Marina Abramovic's twelve year long collaboration and relationship with Ulay can be seen as an illustration of this ancient myth that wholeness is to be sought in the equal reunion of two fragments. Within this long tradition of dualist principles and thought that reaches back to hinduist creation myths the two artists explored the pain and endurance of relationships between themselves as individuals and between the public and themselves as artists or a couple. The duality of the sexes is directly manifested:

> We are representing female and male energy, put together as a symbiosis like an 'it', ... representing those two different forces. (Abramovic in Künstlerhaus Bethanien, 1983, p.18)

Like a personification of Jung's concept of anima and animus, the collaborated performances seem like an attempt at integrating the contrasexual Other in order to reach a state of unity and totality. In this process gender and ego barriers based on a sharp polarity of male and female components are abandoned. When the two artists sit back to back with their hair knotted together for long periods of time (*Relation in Time*, 1977, duration: 17 hours, fig.16, p.34) or when one breath circulates between them for 19 minutes while their mouths are pressed together and their noses are blocked with filtertips in *Breathing In/Breathing Out* (1977, fig.17, p.35) they represent the two halves of this dualism equally unified in interdependency.

However, the dichotomical relationship always inheres a symbiotic nature as each definition is derived from the existence of the Other. The subject's identity is always relational as it is recognised in its difference to the Other and vice versa (Jefferson, 1989). The important aspect in Abramovic's and Ulay's approach to self-Other relations is the continuous aim to replace power structures of inferiority and domination that are commonly mapped upon the relationship of the oppositions with



Relation in Time, 1977 fig.16





Breathing In/Breathing Out, 1977 fig.17


a harmonious non-hierarchical balance. Like Abramovic's solo performances, this body of work is mainly an attempt to integrate the commonly subordinated Other on equal terms and thus unify and merge polarities into one.

In opposition to western dualistic world views developed after Plato, whose work helped to elaborate the basic beliefs that underlie the separation of civilisation from nature, mind from body, reason from emotion, Abramovic's and Ulay's collaborated work inheres a yin-yang structure that philosophically corresponds to a more organic and holistic tradition. Categorical distinctions are dissolved by the realisation of the fundamental interrelatedness of all being to form a whole. This understanding, based on principles that can be found in most ancient philosophies, for example in Taoist thought, is of pivotal importance regarding Abramovic's ecological orientation which will be addressed in the subsequent chapter.

The attempt "to choreograph your whole existence" (Ulay in Iles, 1988, p.16) and the essential focus on unity and mutual synchronicity started with the decision for constant movement in 1976. Mobility and the reduction of needs to a minimum while living in a van made a complete *Vital Art* possible. Abramovic's and Ulay's exploration of human relations took them around the globe while especially seeking extreme surroundings such as deserts to intensify the "self-therapeutic implications" (Ulay in Iles, 1988, p.14) of their work. Numerous prolonged travels in Australia and China also enabled them to directly engage with traditional indigenous societies and their ritual practices and meditative techniques which crucially influenced their performance work.

The collaborative period culminated in walking the Great Wall of China (*The Lovers*, 1988, fig.18, p.37) as a contrasting extension of the earlier work which involved the human body in sitting, lying or standing positions but mainly explored the possibilities in non-movement. The reintroduction of physical movement was urgently needed by the two artists after years of *Nightsea Crossing* performances (1982-1986, fig.19, p.38) which consisted of periods of motionless sitting, a practice in the tradition of Australian aboriginal culture and Buddhist meditation. Over five years a total of 90 days was performed at various locations while fasting and remaining silent.

The immense political difficulties that had to be overcome in the planning of *The Lovers* and the ancient symbolism attached to the Great Wall contributed to this most significant attempt at the conjunction of energies when each of the artists set

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The Lovers - The Great Wall Walk, 1988 fig.18





Nightsea Crossing, 1982-86 fig.19



out at one end to meet in the middle three months later. Paradoxically, this first project to be realised physically apart after twelve years of collaboration also became the last. Nevertheless, the separation of the two had been inevitable. According to Lacanian theory, dyadic unity, i.e. a state of completeness and harmony where difference does not exist, cannot become a lasting state in reality (Moi, 1985, pp.99).



# <u>Chapter 3</u> <u>Redefining Identity</u>

*The Lovers*, a project initially supposed to end with a wedding ceremony, actually conditioned Abramovic and Ulay to work and live apart when it was finally realised after five years of planning (Abramovic in Iles, 1988, p.15). During the period of collaboration self-identity had become completely absorbed in the concept of interdependency and unity. Abramovic describes how this process occurred during the performance *Nightsea Crossing*: "...we completely lose our personalities. I am not presenting Marina, he is not representing Ulay, we are transformed ..." and Ulay concludes: "... into a model" (Abramovic, Ulay in Künstlerhaus Bethanien, 1983, p.19).

Redefining individual concepts of identity was essential for each of the fragments of the split symbiosis which, by definition, inherently demands an interrelated coexistence. The collaborative period laid the foundation for the new direction in Abramovic's work in that the roots for her shift in self-understanding from being self-centred to being focused on inducing self-reflection and change in others are to be found here: in addition to the insight that in order to reach a state of wholeness sharp polarities have to be overcome, the important aspects of this period can be summarised in thoughts on journey, death and energy. These rather large ideas hint at a further development of perspective. While Abramovic's quest, described in the ideas of the journey, is still directed by the fundamental need to relate and connect herself in order to achieve, though temporarily, a form of unity, the individual level in the solo performances and the dualistic level in the collaborative work have made way for a global embrace: the identification of the self within the realm of nature, the connection with the global world.



#### 3.1. The Journey

In the end it is also about the question of how to come to a peaceful state of mind. There are so many different ways to come to that point, and it's a long way. You can experience it only for moments, this clarity, but then you lose it again. There is all that work that must be done to stabilise this state, and that takes more than one lifetime to achieve. (Abramovic in Goldberg, 1995, p.18)

Motivated by a longing for wholeness and unity the 'journey' as a literal and metaphorical concept has become the central part of Marina Abramovic's work. In opposition to popular fantasies of dropping out, her extensive travels do not resemble an 'escape route' but they are a project of learning and personal development. Going away to the marginal and remote places as a common undertaking among artists evokes the myth of the artist inspired by nature and solitude. To Abramovic, isolation and extreme surroundings are energising and function as a means of mental and physical purification (Abramovic in Drathen, 1993, p.234). When leaving the social context she places herself in a time and space relationship to experience the 'bare' or 'true' self, stripped of its securing cultural framework; an experience that leads her to the feeling of complete oneness in the identification of self and nature.

Unlike the idea of the romantic exile that symbolises art's autonomy and separateness from society Abramovic always feels the need to move on in order to "pass on my experience" (Abramovic in Drathen, 1993, p.233). The urge to express her visions, again, relates her to the notion of the call in shamanism (Levy, 1988, p.54) and always connects her with society.

A journey means to exchange routine and protection for change and vulnerability. It is the ultimate way to strip away established securities. The coherence of a journey solely comes from the constant experience of fragmentation and instability. The lack of a stable concept is reflected in Abramovic's work as she did not use performance as an experimental medium for a variety of ideas before turning to object making as a manifestation of stable and fixed beliefs. Her journey continues, she keeps working with the variety of different mediums, materials, video, performance. In her recent theatrical performances *Biography* (1992, fig.20, p.42) and *Delusional* (1995) stages of her life-journey form the subject.

As Abramovic's journey also resembles the spiritual search for peace and clarity it curiously welcomes change and is bare of prejudices not knowing where the









Biography, 1992fig.20



answers are to be found. This idea connotes progress, development and movement as characteristics in opposition to stagnation. Abramovic deeply understands her journey as life-long. Any form of stability or phase of satisfaction can only occur temporarily as stages of a journey, a long term success in her quest would mean the loss of the driving force or the desire in her life. This assumption corresponds to Freud's positing of death as the ultimate object of desire in which the lost unity is recaptured, the split subject is finally healed (Moi, 1985, p.101).

#### 3.2. Death

To Marina Abramovic the transience of moments of a journey or of her experiences of peace and clarity is an accepted fact like the actuality of death in life. In a metaphorical sense, death has always been present in her ephemeral performance work. All that remains after a performance is finished are photographs, a video or some written accounts or the audience's memories of the experience. Looking at the documentation of a performance is completely different from experiencing the unique event itself.

Abramovic's investigation of her physical and mental limits initiated in the early performances seems to be supported by her discovery during her travels that non-western cultures meditation techniques are originally often used to eliminate the fear of death and pain. Dealing with fear has always been one of Abramovic's principal means by which to overcome her physical limitations. Facing one's fears relates to the previously described idea of the journey due to the intrinsic demand of a confrontation with the unknown. Abramovic regards fear as a prevalent feature of western society's existence in comforting trivial chatter that cannot disguise the fragility of western society's present foundations of domination and control (Abramovic in Watson, 1995, unpaged). Fear in this context is the fear of death, the ultimate reality beyond human control. As a consequence methods of healing must always be seen in connection to death: "Entering the other side is a preparation to enter death" (Abramovic, 1995, unpaged). The attempt to come to terms with the fact of death is a further act of balancing: Death as the key to existence reveals life's affiliation to dualist principles. The full scope of life's meaning can only be grasped by the presence of its 'counterpart', death. Moreover, the uniqueness of each moment paradoxically depends on its being limited.



However, the 'discovery' of the transience of physical existence is not to be confused with existentialist perceptions of life's meaninglessness in the face of apparent 'nothingness'. In Abramovic's body experiments she passes through a metaphorical death of pain and exhaustion to experience a metaphysical, universal form of energy. Compared to the ecstatic shamanic experience, which involves the traditional schema of an initiation ceremony in terms of suffering, death and resurrection, this taste of universality lies beyond 'death'. This refers back to Abramovic's statement above that stabilisation takes "more than one lifetime to achieve" and stresses her belief in the spiritual, unexplainable which guides her life.

### 3.3. Energy: Connecting the Individual with the Global Body

Marina Abramovic's early solo and collaborated performances circulate around energetic processes. Due to an expansion of this interest in energy to an interest in the energy lines of the earth while staying at a monastery in Tibet (1982), she began to conceive her body as an extension of this vital organism (Abramovic, 1994, p.41).

Abramovic's obsession with energy flow and circulation is linked to the described idea of death. The experience of a special kind of universal energy when entering a different state of mind was the aim in most of the early solo performances. While the early collaborated performances tied in with the concept of her previous solo work, the travelling periods with Ulay brought about a change in the perception of energy as vitality:

At the beginning of our *Relation Work* we considered vitality as an energy for physical motion, with the effort to direct movement towards physical limitations. Now we consider vitality as an energy of sensitivity for inner and outer dialogues. Such a dialogue depends on the speed of sensitivity. (Abramovic and Ulay, 1980, p.188/189)

Such sensitive awareness is illustrated through the long periods of motionless sitting in *Nightsea* Crossing (fig.19, p.38). Here, physical movement made way for the pure presence of the bodies; actual, physical, self-imposed pain is exchanged for the quiet ordeal of remaining without distraction in order to perceive the world offered in non-movement and silence, and thus, enter into a dialogue with metaphysical forces.



Endurance in pursuing monotonous activities or rather non-activities has far-reaching effects on Abramovic's perception of her identity: "weariness falling on my body and thoughts. I cease to exist" (Abramovic in Stedelijk Museum, 1989, p.146). This description of an experience of oneness while walking the Great Wall of China is reminiscent of identification processes during the early collaborative period between Abramovic and Ulay. When Abramovic says she was "reading the earth's landscape with my feet" (Abramovic in Stedelijk Museum, 1989, p.36) she refers to her own identity as part of a larger global concept.

During her travels Abramovic encountered her "places of power" (Abramovic, 1995, unpaged) where she intensely corresponded to the place's energy that was offered to her. Her interest in the energy stores of the earth in materials like crystals, iron and copper had direct impact on the realisation of the *Transitory Objects*. Abramovic's intention to pass on her knowledge and experience of meditation techniques is further manifested in the objects' apparent links to *Nightsea Crossing* in terms of their conception as furniture-like sculpture and the instruction for the public to quietly remain within one position. The artist's shift in the perception of energy while collaborating with Ulay is reflected in her conceptions of the objects and explains their striking difference to the former performance work.

Mind and body must be engaged in meditative concentration to activate and receive the mineral's influence to awaken higher awareness and thus, in creating a dialogic relationship, to achieve an identification of the body within the realm of nature. It seems that in blending former oppositions into one these ecstatic experiences give a taste of universality, wholeness and eternity because "when you are not physically limited it (time) will not exist" (Abramovic in Künstlerhaus Bethanien, 1983, p.17). Energy never dies, it just changes form.

During the life we have to die, literally and metaphorically, in order to know what it's all about. Then we can go through the process of life free from fear of dying. We have to live our lives here and now. Every day is the last day. (Abramovic, 1995, unpaged)



# <u>Chapter 4</u> <u>The Global Identity and the Global Crisis</u>

A form of self-understanding based on the previously mentioned principles links the individual to the global body. Accepting death without fear and thus defining vitality by the way of responding to the earth's energy implies a feeling of belonging to the global principle of development and decay.

One of the essential steps for Marina Abramovic to achieve this form of connectedness was to free herself of a cultural context. Due to their strong individual focus the early performances as a documentation of a process of individuation might evoke notions of the lonely alienated individual struggling against society. In fact, the preoccupation with seeking the individual's physical and mental limits was often regarded as a general return to existentialism within a large part of the performance movement of the seventies:

What makes the subjective-thinker type of the performance movement so close to the existentialist attitude here is his critical rejection of man as a 'mere result', of his spontaneity being manipulated by economic, scientific, and technological norms. (Gorsen, 1984, p.137)

The desire to understand the self also drives Abramovic to explore the possibilities of corporeal existence. As part of her difficult search for a 'true' self, this investigation is necessarily accompanied by a rejection of certain cultural attitudes and norms.<sup>v</sup> The 'true' self needs to be stripped of disguising, manipulating, habitual and culturally imposed patterns of behaviour. This emphasis placed on individualism and difference as common signifiers of alienation and not-belonging revives myths of the alienated modern artist.<sup>vi</sup>

Alienation as a sign of the times does not only function as a source of inspiration for artistic expression but also plays a fundamental part in the contemporary conception of self-identity which is commonly based on notions of otherness. Self-awareness is generally conducive to a feeling of not-belonging, but in relation to Abramovic's artistic career, on the other hand, personal freedom comes to indicate a feeling of connectedness and community. Although "greedy for authenticity" (Abramovic in Stedelijk Museum, 1989, p.36) the artist does not



personify western capitalist society's ideal of the self-determined individual, bare of social and moral commitment. In her quest for a true self and meaning, she is rooted in an existence of responsibility, care and participation in the world around her: "In conjunction lies the only possibility of extreme peace and rest" (Abramovic in Stedelijk Museum, 1989, p.189).

Abramovic's holistic ethics resemble a form of self-disciplined and limited freedom derived from her recognition that the individual is a member of a wider community. An awareness of transience and fragmentation is an essential part of Abramovic's life and does not lead her to the commonly expressed feelings of loss of control and carelessness: "Only when one is aware of temporality can one take full responsibility" (Abramovic, 1995, unpaged). The post-modern mentality, on the other hand, is reflected by the

isolate individual aware that everything comforting is an illusion, that there is no one truth or one reality, that if truth exists it is individual (inner) and must be individually created through self-knowledge, that art (coherence) and truth are where individual self-aware persons find and create them. (Dissanayake, 1988, p.196)

This attitude simply conceals increasing loneliness and self-absorbency in the disguise of freedom and self-fulfilment. An insistence on individuality tries to conceal the actual lack. While traditional religious, spiritual or political belief systems that used to have collective validity have become increasingly deconstructed as a consequence of Enlightenment's liberating message the undeniable hunger for an acceptable myth remains to be satisfied only by the individual's effort.

In content, Abramovic's early performances with their negatively charged associations like violence, self-inflicted pain and danger so thoroughly alluded to the phenomena of alienation and identity crisis that they almost seem like an attempt to "imitate the civilizatory process in detailed, often dramatic form" (Gorsen, 1984, p.138). Once exhausted, the reenactive aspect of Abramovic's performances, which implies the focus on the self, had to be channelled into a new concept. The performances deliberately initiated processes of deconstruction, whereas the objects illustrate the following attempt to reconstruct or to find means of relation and myths.

The experience of the self as a relational instead of a self-contained entity undermines patriarchal mentality by acknowledging moral or social responsibilities.



Abramovic's private aim of creating an internal psychic order has led her to a form of public commitment in her art concerned with the creation of an alternative social order. To regard this form of conscious-raising activism as a purely narcissistic drive would be far too simplistic; it is a strategy of survival due to the identification with the global body that is constantly threatened by forces beyond Abramovic's personal control. Self-interest and the general interests of humanity merge into one in this approach. Consequently, the holistic view regards the global macrocosm as a reflection of the intimate and personal and vice versa: the individual soul cannot be healed when there is no cure for the environment.

The attempt at introducing a set of global ecological values and obligations has far-reaching implications as it demands a total revaluation of western industrialised society's framework and foundations. The capitalist paradigm has been repeatedly seen as the cause of global instability and inequality since it ignores human nature and 'heritage' as social beings and has distanced itself from its "original environment of adaptedness" (Dissanayake, 1988, p.196). Individual differences are stressed instead of learning from human sameness. In this context, learning from other, mainly preindustrial cultures who are closer to nature seems to make sense in order to increase the number of belief systems in which to find new myths.

The Other, necessary for the construction and establishment of western identity, becomes the site on which western fears as well as desires are projected. In the context of minority groups' rise to prominence in order to seek equality, whether it be as a subculture within a society or globally, the practice of 'culture crossing' has become widely problematised: the act of borrowing from 'primitive' cultures with the suggestion that they are somehow less alienated and more 'authentic' than modern western culture is seen as deeply problematic for it evokes the polarity of colonialism. The appropriation and reinvention of the objects of another culture is often regarded as colonial in nature and invokes the deep division between a scarcely acknowledged desire and the exploitation and domination of that culture (Rhodes, 1994, pp. 195; Bhabha, 1994, pp.66).

Pointing to cultural differences is closely connected to the construction of distorted stereotypical images which enhance the division due to the use of positive and desirable attributes such as pure, good, simple and natural on the one hand and negative ones such as the lack of progress, development and civilisation on the other.



Labeling a different culture 'primitive' leads to the criticised misrepresentations and the establishment of stereotypes as it already implies a value judgement according to western definitions of civilisation and (high) culture. The presented image thus can be regarded as a 'distorting mirror' as self-representations are exchanged for a western representation created by artists who articulate their own ideas and fantasies about the meaning of objects and the lives of people from different cultures. In this context the representational artwork functions to serve rather than to challenge contemporary power relations and distribution. However, representing reality is impossible as representation is always partial.

Marina Abramovic has taken up the teachings of other cultures in search of meaningful reconnection with spirit, earth and soul. Her use of aboriginal culture's esoteric practices such as fasting, sitting and waiting enrich her concept of art initiated in the early performances.

The characteristics of 'primitive' sources were thus seen to conform to, rather than simply inspire the changing interests of modern artists. (Perry, 1993, p.3)

In this context, the 'primitive' tendency must be understood as already being intuitively produced from within her art instead of being 'borrowed'.

The accusation of cultural colonialism when westerners use a different cultures' language and symbols signifies the kind of binary oppositional thinking responsible for the sharp polarisation. It paternally suggests the different 'primitive' culture's vulnerability and need for protection instead of acknowledging an equal status. The different culture is as little a homogeneous and unified complex as the 'West' is. Moreover, it is not remote but within reach. The overly simplified construction of difference does not take account of cultural exchange and learning made possible by globalisation.<sup>vii</sup>

Criticism of the binary thinking characteristic of patriarchal capitalist societies frequently mimics the limitations of such tunnel vision. The mode of thinking which brought about the criticised circumstances is not challenged. Culture defined as a self-enclosed system is raised to an ideological imperative which leaves no room for cross-cultural references.



By continuing to insist on a fundamental difference between the two world views such theories reproduce the dilemma at the heart of modern artistic Primitivism, that is the relevance of the primitive as a point of opposition in postmodern Western cultures is apparently given institutional sanction, whilst at the same time its difference to those cultures is reemphasized. (Rhodes, 1994, p.196)

Instead of leading to a greater global dialogue, narrow-minded theories on multiculturalism's recognition of cultural difference often proclaim an ethnocentrism that reinforces separatism.

Within the tradition of dualist thought 'difference' is perceived as the category dividing two terms with apparently opposing meanings and not as a coexisting blend of various shades. The stereotype as not only a simplification but "a false representation of a given reality" (Bhabha, 1994, p.75) functions as the ideological significant construction of Otherness.

Binary oppositional thinking with its effects as described above penetrates all spheres of western thinking, even traditional science, and, in treating things as inherently divided, it denies a coherent description of the world based on wholeness (Bohm, 1980). The illusory assumption of the categorised fragments' separate and independent existence consequently leads to endless conflict and confusion in society (Latour, 1995).

Artists such as Marina Abramovic who move within open cultural borders do not necessarily speak out on behalf of others but might seek them for knowledge and advice that might just seem valuable for them and others. Based on an understanding of the self as part of a global community, her artistic approach does not pay account of western categorisation practices. Difference is a term to distinguish between individuals and respected on a basis that does not attach simplified quality judgements to them. It is conceived without opposition. In employing other cultures' esoteric practices to initiate social change in a western context, the *Transitory Objects* can be read portraying a general message that other cultures possess an important knowledge and a connection to nature that western civilisation has lost. The use of rituals and meditation techniques from other cultural spheres is therefore not an act of mystification and exploitation but points to significant knowledge of ways to restore the equilibrium lost to western societies.<sup>viii</sup> Relating Abramovic's



work to natural mysticism is inadequate for it is a strongly western description: based on rationality, it can grasp neither her approach nor the global patterns of spiritual thinking in 'primitive' cultures.

Certainly Abramovic's work illustrates her individual fantasies, her private visions but her holistic approach extends beyond herself. Her concern with the global present and the future looks at and learns from human sameness and blends traditional and modern forms that seem appropriate to convey the intended message.

When people say that shamanistic practice is atavistic and irrational, one might answer that the attitude of contemporary scientists is equally old-fashioned and atavistic, because we should by now be at another state of development in relationship to the material. (Beuys in Tisdall, 1979, p. 28)

Marina Abramovic's emphasis of non-rationality and the spiritual is opposed to the western fixation on control, rational explanation and definition. Her belief to find the answer to the secret of life beyond death always points to the moment when one has to face a state of a lack of control and is in conflict with the narrow-mindedness of contemporary, purely, rational thought.

The accepted lack of complete understanding leads her to an existence rooted in responsibility that cherishes the transient existence on earth as a gift. Due to her feeling as part of a global concept she moves beyond dualist thinking that governs the western mindset and thus prevents western society from reaching a state of balance. The contemporary ecological crisis and social phenomena such as alienation demand a repositioning of human beings as part and not ruler of their environment. Global thinking does not pay account to cultural and class differences, it is a cross-cultural concern: "Energy is really beyond cultures" (Abramovic in Goy, 1990, p.51). In this context the look at human sameness and fundamental human needs instead of human difference seems logical. The change required in order for it to rise to the pivot of contemporary issues involves a redefinition of attitudes and priorities on a personal and political level to transcend the limits imposed by cultural conditioning. Abramovic's aim to replace common power structures of domination and inferiority between dualist principles is also illustrated in her fascination with the two halves in their most extreme forms: east - west, communist - capitalist, male - female, mind - body, .... The recurring artistic motif of dealing with these extremes

in order to overcome the separation can be supplemented with a reference to the shamanic concept of healing by drawing deeper towards the origin of suffering. For psychotherapist Thomas Moore the way to move beyond opposing dichotomies lies in the process of deepening both sides. He radically accepts the coexistence of paradoxes as the result of this process by quoting Yogi Berra's line: "If you meet the fork in the road, take it" (Moore in Gablik, 1995, p. 402).

The holistic belief that change occurs through the dynamic interplay of opposites rests on the fundamental understanding of the interrelatedness of all matter. This form of 'earth wisdom' can be traced in a number of ancient philosophies but it is also confirmed by modern science of ecology, "today's true avantgarde" (Drathen, 1993, p.228). Influenced by relativity theory and quantum mechanics modern physics has abandoned the idea of time and space as separate entities in favour of regarding them as dynamic qualities in a curved space, thereby reasserting the basic oneness of the universe (Marshall, 1992, p.373).<sup>ix</sup> Moreover, chaos theory as a science of process than of stability denies notions of complete knowledge, objectivity and predictability. Chaos and order are seen as ends of a continuous spectrum and not as binary opposites. However, the organic way of perceiving the world which is reaffirmed by these theories has not yet entered the general public's consciousness. The implied consequences have not yet been fully realised.

Abramovic's contribution to the process of cultural and ecological healing mainly rests on her own personal story. Her biography and experience have fed her work and at the same time become the subject of it. The craving to understand the self, to memorise important events and connect them in order to make sense and learn from them, to achieve an inner cleansing in focusing on and re-enacting moments that formed her character is once more illustrated in Abramovic's recent publication of two books *Biography* (1994), a reflection of her past that was also staged as a theatrical performance (fig.20, p.42), and *Cleaning the House* (1995), a collection of inspirations to her work. Passing on her knowledge and experience also forms part of her life as a professor at art colleges. The underlying teaching principle follows the tradition of her own work, that artists have to learn how to see with their whole body.

Performance per se can be regarded as a fragment of the performer's biography, a part of the performer's story. Since the performer does not lecture or



preach but rather demands the viewer's awareness and sensitivity performance can be understood as an event of indirect teaching that corresponds to shamanic instruction by metaphor which does not primarily depend upon rationally determined thinking. Instead, it implies that one should grasp a situation intuitively in its many interplays of multiple meanings from the concrete to the symbolic. Psychotherapist and writer Sheldon Kopp regards the ability to recall and tell one's story as the reflection of "the paradoxical interstice of power and vulnerability which makes a man most human" (Kopp, 1974, p.14).

While the telling of stories forms an important part in shamanic teaching, the validity and credibility of western "narratives of mastery" that legitimised "Western man's self-appointed mission of transforming the entire planet in his own image" (Owens, 1992, p.339) have become more and more deconstructed. These post-modern approaches have evoked the 'Death of the Author' though neglecting the satisfactory reconstruction of centricities. Environmental activist, artist and author Christopher Manes sees one of the reasons for this development in man's construction of nature as silent:

We've been telling a story for the last five hundred years or so, and the story is: mankind is special, ontologically different from the rest of the world. Only *we* have language, only *we* are subjects. The rest of the world is a universe of 'not-saids' called nature - nature is this immense silence, this immense irrational silence. And that's a story. We need to tell a story which shows that the fiction of Man is just another story, not an ultimate reality. (Manes in Gablik, 1995, p.89)

A possible different story would be to replace man as the active part of the story teller and instead begin to listen to unheard voices. This process challenges the story of human dominance of nature regarded as subordinated dead material.

Careful 'listening' in or to silence is involved in a lot of meditation techniques Marina Abramovic experienced, often together with periods of long motionless sitting. This practice is not only intended with the *Transitory Objects* but it also formed part of the creation: *Waiting for an Idea* (1992, fig.21, p.54) while contemplating on quartz crystals in an Brazilian quartz mine is "like waiting for nature to indicate the approach to take to it - like being the handmaiden of nature




Waiting for an Idea, 1992 fig.21



rather than the manipulator of it" (McEvilley, 1995, p.52) and corresponds to the alchemical approach of assisting nature in its self-realisation.

In applying this idea to the objects *Waiting Room* (1994, fig.22, p.56) becomes an invitation for the participant to listen to not only their inner voices but also to the material's. Waiting is often regarded as occurring in an empty space, 'inbetween', which "can mean great benefits, 'loss of time' can turn into 'time restored'" (Abramovic in Drathen, 1993, p.235). Apart from creating the opportunity for dialogue Abramovic does not even play a part in the story anymore.





Waiting Room, 1994 fig.22



## Conclusion

Artist's today? They are couriers, they accompany people on the true adventure, a journey into the inner self. There are no firmly established religious structures any longer, the old structures have all been destroyed and new ones have not yet emerged. Artists accompany us on our search for a new order.

(Abramovic in Drathen, 1993, p.237)

The *Transitory Objects* were created in a time recognised as 'inbetween'. Ambivalent and paradox theories coexist. The first exhibition of the objects took place in 1989, according to Bruno Latour the year which miraculously exemplified the present contradictory situation since it was the year when capitalism ideologically experienced a world-wide victory over socialism with the fall of the Berlin Wall and simultaneously a world-wide defeat as a consequence of the devastating first conferences on the present global situation that required the end of capitalist economic politics due to the state of natural resources (Latour, 1995, pp.16-18).

Within this contemporary, omnipresent dilemma of reconstruction, of searching for new definitions and urgently needed new myths that is marked by a total lack of collectively shared set of beliefs due to the individualisation of positions and opinions, the artist seems to have the potential to incorporate the special function of a guide with quasi-religious characteristics: the artist as the new universal subject, autonomous and self-determined, liberated of social or cultural context but incorporating society's conscience who, empowered with some special knowledge or truth which is expressed through the artwork, tries to direct and transform society.

This melange of revived common myths that forms one of the contemporary emerging roles of the artist has been widely criticised by Grant Kester; the described artistic approach is regarded as highly problematic and contradictory for it evokes questions of authorisation, justification and power. As these do not seem to be answerable with consensus, they appear to be answered by the individuals: the artist's position is arrogantly justified "simply by virtue of being an artist", Kester concludes (Kester, 1993, p.14). The artist chooses his or her path and on the other hand every single member of his or her audience deliberately decides on his or her presence. Unlike the shaman in tribal communities who is elected, the contemporary



artist's position is individually seized and the work is experienced only by a small part of the actual society. However, for individuals searching for a meaningful reconnection with their existence the artist may appear not unlike a shaman as the bearer of some universal truth. The viewer or the pilgrim seeks the healer in expectation of revelation, in hope of a meaningful experience.

One might add that the actual presence of an audience and the possibility to exhibit within institutionalised spaces might be sufficient as justification for the artist's work since it shows the societal demand and interest.

The privilege of her artistic mission even enables Marina Abramovic to remove geodes and crystals from their natural context. In her view, the sake of teaching validates destruction in order to point to destruction:

> When I take blocks of crystal from the pillars of the earth ..., then I am perfectly aware that I am disturbing a fine, precious balance. But on the other hand I think that we live in an age which faces emergency: our consciousness has completely separated from our sources of energy. ... If only very few people develop a new consciousness and approach the idea of unity between body and soul, between body and soul and the cosmos, then the benefit will be so much more than the damage I have caused.

(Abramovic in Drathen, 1993, p.227)

The lack of consensus, general truths and thus the emphasis placed on the individual freedom implies the problem of the coexistence of different belief systems without one being turned into an ideology and the other one being condemned. Who is to answer the question of right and wrong? This issue permeates private, public and global spheres.

Who is to decide when human interference is morally acceptable? Marina Abramovic's above statement justifies her work in terms of the 'good cause' as a result of personal idealism and belief. Yet the realisation of her ideas needs to be validated by an utterly importance since she does not proceed according to her own dogma. In fact, "many tribal people consider mining as a direct violation of Mother Earth" (Marshall, 1992, p.154). A view of the world as one organism rejects this practice since the removal of parts of the earth which are often regarded as the earth's vital organs might cause the whole system to malfunction: "Harmony with



land is like harmony with a friend; you cannot cherish his right hand and chop off his left" (Leopold, 1949, p.189).

To Abramovic on the other hand, the ends, i.e. the potential benefits of her objects, justify the means. While calculating right and wrong mainly in relation to individuals the interest of the wider biotic community might be sacrificed. Her form of justification finally raises the question about her project's effect and success.

As a moral artist Abramovic is at the same time part of and in conflict with a society desired as audience. An art institution, however, that is part of the criticised society, would hardly be troubled by issues raised within its walls:

Artists working within museum-based culture are not expected to want to effect much social change, nor are those aspirations even deemed relevant to an assessment of art culture's values. (Cameron in Gablik, 1991, p.139)

A form of art that is therapeutic in intention towards the self and society is highly suspicious to a society that denies the possibilities of therapeutic change to accommodate its own status quo. Moreover, this approach inherently demands to take art out of the realm existing separate from or in opposition to society or rather to question the myth of this assumption. Society has proven to be immune to artistic transgression due to assimilation. Integration of supposedly radical influences serves capitalist society's need for the supply of consumer goods.

Those who would transform the world or solve its problems must choose whether to begin first with the society or the individual. Because art is today divorced from the communally shared rituals that once maintained and reinforced society, those who call upon art to effect social improvement are taking up an instrument as outmoded and irrelevant to modern needs as a hand axe. (Dissanayake, 1988, p.195)

The realisation of this problem has lead artists such as Beuys to expand his activities from the art world to the world of politics. His approach negated the sharp division between art, politics and society, between private and public. However, facing the complex and interwoven net of problems he grew more pessimistic about the possibility of social change through political means and started placing more



emphasis on the self-determination of the individual as the only true social force (Stachelhaus, 1991, p.40), a belief shared by Abramovic.

And indeed, in the context of the relation between individualism and the current societal crisis, Mark Dawes points out that Marina Abramovic's approach at the same time identifies the problem and its possible solution by showing "that the power of the self and the physical body is eroded in correspondence with the erosion of the spiritual element in Western society, and that overcoming this depletion is possible by turning not to technological or scientific solutions, but to the power of the human will itself" (Dawes, 1995, p.28).

According to her previously described artistic mission art becomes the 'religion of culture', an understanding that still speaks of a belief in art's potential to build community and transport and reinforce values and myths. Due to art's correspondence to non-rational, emotional or spiritual aspects of the psyche art has nevertheless been repeatedly seen as a potential 'tool' to reharmonize society. Suzi Gablik thinks that the possibility of a 'connective' aesthetics, based in vigorously active and impassioned engagement would restore art's connectedness with the world after a century of vision-oriented, purist ideals (Gablik, 1995, p.17).

However, if art is to play an active role in tackling the global crisis the very roots of modern aesthetic structure that place art in the realm of capitalist society have to be questioned in addition to art's specialist and isolationist tendencies since

> the very concept of dominating nature first emerged from man's domination of women in patriarchal society and of man's domination of man in hierarchical society. .... To overcome the present ecological crisis it is therefore necessary to end this state of affairs. (Marshall, 1992, p.426)

In some of her most recent *Power Objects*, *Cleaning the House* and *Cleaning the Body* (1995, fig.23, p.61), Marina Abramovic blends the familiarity of a tool with the exotic character of crystal. Here, the cleaning and purifying effect of the minerals is illustrated in a purely vision-centred concept. The *Power Objects* are not meant to be touched but to "radiate their own energy" (Abramovic in IMMA, 1995, unpaged). This passive spectorial orientation lacks the power of experience which is inherent in the *Transitory Objects*. Yet even these objects have never challenged the isolation of the artwork although they are meant to have the effect of reconnecting a





Cleaning the Body, 1995 fig.23



"disconnected society like ours" (Abramovic, 1995, unpaged). They remain within the self-referential orbit of museums and galleries. Although Abramovic refers to problems concerning not only all western societies but the global population the experience of her work is restricted to art audiences. The question remains whether the objects actually have an effect on the mending process or whether they simply function as symbols of society's loss. Framed in a museum context the latter dangerously contributes to the possibility of a mere aestheticization of problems and positions.

Moreover, Abramovic' s constant use of the pronoun "we" (f.ex. in Drathen, 1993, p. 227), referring to western societies or even to the human species as a whole, implies that all humans share a collective guilt for the despoilation of the planet and overlooks the above mentioned mechanisms of domination and oppression, thus an immense responsibility of the industrialised countries in the north in addition to particular classes within these societies for the ecological crisis.

Based on Abramovic's private experience, the message carried by the objects is one possible 'solution' for the 'free' individual searching for reconnection: Wholeness is to be sought from nature. Ideally, this is the conclusion after a successful dialogue with the objects' spiritual forces. Although the intentional aim is to direct an audience towards a unifying experience through mental and physical engagement with the art work, the Transitory Objects rather confront the viewer with his or her own feelings of embarrassment and courage when deciding whether or not to follow Abramovic's instructions. The museum context hardly provides the necessary solitude and silence to experience the objects. Placed next to a video installation in Abramovic's exhibition Objects Performance Video Sound at the Irish Museum of Modern Art in Dublin in 1995 they appeared strikingly absurd and far from fulfilling their task. Thus the reconstructed sound piece War from 1972 in the exhibition entering corridor not only prepared an audience for the exhibition as intended but also distracted concentration as the blasting machine gun was still audible outside the installation space and always announced the arrival of another visitor.

In this context the minerals' inherent power for transformation and energy to heal becomes a question of believing rather than experiencing. Participation is the 'different' and unusual experience in an institution where touching the artwork is mainly disapproved of. The objects can hardly be taken as a serious introduction to



meditation, but they might help to reach a contemplative state of mind and thus increase one's sensitivity for the exhibition. After all, the quality of spiritual exchange depends upon the participant's creative approach and belief.

On the other hand, however, the confrontation with one's own feeling when dealing with the question of participation might just indicate how far removed one actually is from spiritual experience and this realisation may be the first step in altering this situation.

In neglecting the *Transitory Objects'* demands the exhibition's conceptualisation might just reveal the importance of looking at the artist's journey, the various developments, processes and projects instead of simply experiencing the artwork, a position this thesis wishes to support. After initiating interest in the artist's self-understanding and concepts Abramovic's work becomes the reminder of different stages of her career. The major impact is derived not from an isolated work alone but from the overall look at her as a model, with all the questions raised. If Abramovic is to act as a moral guide to the art audience one cannot ignore her position of privilege and the questions this status raises.

The current coexistence of modern life and damaging progress on the one hand and the awareness of the inevitable consequences of this development on the other remains one of the great unresolved contradictions of modern human existence.

> What does this tell us about our society and our own nature? What is our true nature? What matters most deeply to us? Is our society in accord with our true nature and deepest values? (William Keepin in Gablik, 1995, p.7)

The fact that although humans know they should not violate the earth they persist in doing so then often leads to attempts of justification referring to the privacy of the vocabulary of one's self-understanding alongside a feeling of powerlessness regarding global issues.

Individual change in consciousness is already a process that demands a lot of effort. To effect resonance in a complete global shift of attitude it takes more than single individuals fighting for the 'good cause' as these processes are of such complex nature. In terms of the present state of environmental crisis they can be regarded as part of evolution in terms of a long-term strategy of survival. Therefore, global concerns and fundamental human demands have to rise to pivotal importance



in all areas. Dealing with them cannot remain restricted to certain specialised areas as the change of consciousness has to occur in all spheres. The investigation of isolated parts of a problem can not lead to a full solution after the realisation of a fundamental universal interdependency.

However, even single attempts might result in a slow but steady chain reaction. In a sense that 'the private is the political' every responsible action within the individual's possibilities instead of despairing paralysis has its progressive effect. In aiming to meet the enormous challenge Marina Abramovic's work and understanding contributes to the important continuous investigation of proposals. In this context, her approach might indicate a direction:

The artists ... who have moved beyond protest and oppositional mind to embrace reconciliation and positive social alternatives do not represent merely the response of isolated individuals to the deadendedness of our present situation. ... They are prototypes who embody the next historical and evolutionary stage of consciousness. (Gablik, 1991, p.182)

The individual subjective vision is not a dogmatic ideology that demands universal validity. In fact, the shaman does not provide answers as there are none. What the shaman knows that the seeker does not is that every human being is a pilgrim.



## Notes

<sup>1</sup> The art world's recognition of the emerging shamanic artistic practice has led to its categorisation among other contemporary subspecies or minority phenomena that stress notions of difference, for example in Edward Lucie-Smith's *Race, Sex and Gender in Contemporary Art* (1994).

<sup>ii</sup> Abramovic does not even resist her self-imposed rules when they become lifethreatening, examples are *Lips of Thomas* in Insbruck in 1975 (fig.14, p.30) that ended with the audience's intervention or *Rhythm 0* in Naples in 1974 (fig.24, p.67) which Abramovic even describes as "complete surrender to an audience" since she allowed the audience to do with her as they pleased while remaining passive and thus taking full responsibility. She did not end the performance when somebody put a pistol to her head but realised "that an audience can kill" (Abramovic in Iles, 1988, p.17).

<sup>iii</sup> The impact of her personal history on her work has been analysed at great length for example by Chrissie Iles (*Cleaning the Mirror*, 1995) or by David Elliott (*Balkan Baroque*, 1995).

<sup>iv</sup> Symbols used in rites and other magical activities aiming at transition such as tarot readings traditionally allow more than one interpretation of meaning and thus unify oppositions.

<sup>v</sup>See chapter 2.2.: The Cultural Un-Making, for example Art Must Be Beautiful, Artists Must Be Beautiful (fig.15, p.31).

<sup>vi</sup> This myth is rooted in the early 19th century when artists were beginning to feel more or less displaced in an increasingly industrialised and commercialised society. Art was no longer able to effect an integration between community, society and the self-understanding of the artist leaving communication highly problematic. Due to this pluralistic and often contradictory position, artists started creating own communities that are appropriate to this situation (Gadamer, 1986, p.7).

<sup>vii</sup> The double standard based on mastery thoughts is revealed in the common quality judgements on culture crossing: 'primitives' turning to western cultures are almost accused of abandoning their 'true' nature and their culture, whereas the western person turning to exotic culture is often regarded as sophisticated, well-educated and open-minded. On the one hand it is loss, on the other valuable gain.



<sup>viii</sup> The recognition of undeniable imbalance, fragmentation and alienation has brought about a renewed interest in forgotten spiritual healing traditions also within the own cultural heritage, for example in the area of homeopathy and herbal remedies. Ritual activity offers the possibility of escaping the fragmentation of modern life in favour of experiencing a timeless wholeness.

<sup>ix</sup> See Sheldrake, Rupert, *The Rebirth of Nature - The Greening of Science and God*, London, Century, 1990 or Hawking, Stephan W., *A Brief History of Time*, London, Bantam, 1990





*Rhythm 0*, 1974 fig.24



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