



Olivera Janković

# MARINA ABRAMOVIĆ

## EARLY WORKS THE BELGRADE PERIOD

BELART

## **OLIVERA JANKOVIĆ**

Born in Belgrade in 1955, Olivera Janković graduated in 1980 in history of modern art from Belgrade University, class of Professor Lazar Trifunović, receiving her MA in 1991 under the mentorship of Professor Jerko Denegri. Her thesis on "Zora Petrović, Art as Life" was published by the Serbian Academy of Arts and Sciences in 1995.

She has published a number of works on the West European dimension of art in Serbia: *Nadežda Petrović, Between Art and Politics* (Signature, Belgrade 2003), *Milena Pavlović Barili* (Vojnoizdavački zavod and TOPY, Belgrade, Prometej, Novi Sad 2001) and *Zora Petrović, Art as Life* (SANU, Belgrade 1995). A book on the sculpture of Olga Jevrić is presently awaiting publication.

She has published other articles on fine and applied art, and on the work of Mili-voje Nikolajević, Milo Milunović, Ljubica Sokić, Mrđan Bajić, Sava Halugin and Jovan Soldatović, while also finding time to organise several exhibitions. Her present subject of interest is the relationship between fine art and ideology in the modernist period.

She is a member of the Serbian Society of Art Historians and the Applied Artists and Designers Association of Serbia. She works as a freelance artist in art history, theory and criticism and is an associate of the Bel Art Gallery, Novi Sad.











1. *Rhythm 10*, Contemporanea exhibition, grounds of the Villa Borghese, Rome, February 1974.

2. *Rhythm 5*, Student Cultural Centre, Belgrade, April 1974.

3. *Rhythm 2*, Gallery of Contemporary Art, Zagreb, October 1974.

4. *Rhythm 4*, Galleria Diagramma, Milan, December 1974.

5. *Rhythm 0*, Studio Morra, Naples, February 1975.

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**MARINA ABRAMOVIĆ:**

**EARLY WORKS – The Belgrade Period**

My greatest thanks must go to Professor Ješa Denegri for his invaluable suggestions and support in helping me to see this book through to its completion. I am particularly grateful to Ms. Vesna Latinović who approved the manuscript and undertook to publish it. Gratitude is also due to my colleagues Dragica Vukadinović of the Student Cultural Centre Documentation Department for locating hitherto unpublished photos and identifying the photographers, and to Aleksandra Mirčić and Katarina Krstić of the Documentation Department of the Belgrade Museum of Contemporary Art for their unfailing help and cooperation. The outstanding design by Ljubomir Maksimov and Aleksandar Arsenin has effectively raised professional standards in the design of art publications in this country, for which I am profoundly grateful. My thanks to both reviewers for their encouragement and to librarian Marija Vaš for the first bibliography of Marina Abramović's Belgrade period.

Olivera Janković

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# Instead of an introduction

Olivera Janković's book on *Marina Abramović: Early Works, the Belgrade Period*, is an introduction to the early beginnings of this great international artist. Marina Abramović (b. Belgrade, 1946), produced her early works in Belgrade over a period that lasted from her enrolment at the Academy in 1965 until her thirtieth year and the move to Amsterdam (1975). After her studies, she engaged in drawing and writing texts for various artistic purposes while attending further training in Zagreb at Krsto Hegedušić's Master Workshop. She also taught briefly at the Academy of Fine Arts in Novi Sad. Her first performances took place in Belgrade in 1972. The works that emerged in the brief period between 1972 and 1975, whether performed in Belgrade, at art festivals abroad or in other foreign surroundings, in fact represent her "Belgrade period". At the time she was associated with the Gallery of the Student Cultural Centre (SKC) which was rapidly becoming a cult site of the avant-garde. Together with a group of Belgrade artists (Raša Todosijević, Neša Paripović, Zoran Popović, Slobodan Era Milivojević and Gergelj Urkom) the young Marina Abramović helped build the spirit and atmosphere of the "new artistic practice" and conceptual art.

With hindsight, local art history today notes this phenomenon as one of exceptional importance in the development of Serbian modern art. It was these young artists grouped around the Gallery of the SKC, with Marina Abramović as front runner, who introduced so much that was novel at the time: the new media, the concept of "idea as form", the artwork as performance, changed attitudes towards the institutions. Marina herself refers to her "Belgrade prelude" as exceptionally important: "As for my work in Yugoslavia, it was what we call the foundation stone. This beginning of mine was very important and, of course, essential for the group of people I was working with. What we were doing at the time ran so counter to all the normal norms in Belgrade, but being part of a group gave us the additional strengths to hold out. All

that work was very important for how I was to develop later and all my catalogues mention it as a very significant period in my life." (*Mental Leap*, Marina Abramović in an interview to *Vreme* magazine no. 309, Belgrade 21 September 1996).

Today, as she takes her place among the world's leading artists, the discourse analysis of Marina Abramović's early Belgrade period represents a meaningful contribution to the theory and history of Serbian art. With a fine sense of interpretative responsibility, Olivera Janković translates for us the works of this great artist. In a serious, contextualised and thorough examination of all aspects of Abramović's work, she succeeds in analysing and critically interpreting it, proceeding discreetly but persuasively to its evaluation, summing up for us the value of the contribution made by the new art, in which Marina Abramović is an acknowledged leader: "Liberating and radicalising the artist's behaviour in an attempt to accelerate historical processes and meet events halfway drew art out of its traditional role of embellishing or affirming existing reality, so that it might help the individual to shape his or her life alone, independent of prevailing opinion, the demands of the powers that be, or traditional values."

The preparation of this book for publication has given me extraordinary pleasure. It is my belief that Olivera Janković's writing on the artist's early Belgrade years will contribute to a greater understanding and perception of Marina Abramović's oeuvre, particularly as in these contentious times it is the first monograph of its kind ever to be published in Serbia.

I would like to thank all the individuals and institutions who took part in this project for their exceptional cooperation, creative engagement and unstinting help, in particular Danica Newell, assistant to Marina Abramović, Sidney Russell, Marina Abramović's photo archivist and Dragica Vukadinović, documentary editor at the Belgrade Student Cultural Centre. My special thanks go to Achille Bonito Oliva for the introductory text of this edition.

Vesna Latinović, *Edition Editor*

# Marina Abramović – As Virtual Necessity

"Through the eyes, of course, you can read so much, see so much pain. At the beginning, in the seventies, my performances were more dramatic, more physical, they lasted an hour or two. Gradually they became longer: the longer the time, the more radical the transformation both of you and those watching you. Artificiality disappears, everything becomes reality. That makes you vulnerable and that vulnerability causes the public to respond emotionally."

"Yes, but this emotional response is not an end in itself. We lost our sacred temples, reputation has become our new temple: here we should elevate the spirit, not the opposite. That's why what I ask of myself is radical: I must set an example, people look at me as into a mirror. My preparation is rigorous." (Marina Abramović.)

I met the artist in 1971 in Belgrade during the BITEF, an avant-garde theatre festival where I was in charge of the Persona Exhibition: performance artists who used the stage for their own activities. That year Marina Abramović abandoned painting to devote herself entirely to performance.

In the desperation of the present time, Marina Abramović has not managed to renounce her own alienation and the surviving remnants of happiness (a symptom of the alienation); having refused to express herself through cold metaphor, she now attempts to approach life with the tools of her own physicality and behaviour. The first condition, naturally, is to break with the Renaissance conception of space as something measured, organised, in harmony with the illusion of perspective. She then goes on to occupy the quotidian space in which her artist's imagination lives.

She achieves a balance between the external world and the spirituality of her own external world, so unquestioningly geared towards life and understood as a primary necessity, one tending not simply to emphasise the mental or irrational level of con-

sciousness, but whose aim is to show the real structure of the person in order to make it fully functional. Where there is no longer any separation and the body is not a technical means of transmitting messages, it itself becomes the message.

Marina Abramović, therefore, does not prepare a performance in advance only for it to turn contemplative, thereby freezing the relationship between the public and the artist, but sets off in a different dimension by preparing a performance on the move, in which acting (artificiality) disappears, its place taken by the artist behaving authentically and including both herself and all those watching. They too can contribute to creating a sensitive space, a space not characterised just by the solitariness of the objects and the disconnectedness of the bodies of those present, in which the artist's behaviour reduces the distance between one person and another and expands each individual's psychosomatic ability to develop.

*Rhythm 10* is evidence of this, a performance given during the *Contemporanea* Exhibition in Rome, 1973. The action shown in encyclopaedias of art history is clear and obvious. In her first performance Abramović explores the elements of gesture and ritual. Using twenty knives and two tape recorders, she plays a sort of Russian roulette during which she rhythmically stabs the knife between the splayed fingers of one hand. Each time she cuts herself, she must take another knife of the twenty she has prepared and records the action. When she has wounded herself twenty times, she plays back the recording, listens to the sounds and starts to repeat the movements, trying to make the same mistakes, mixing past and present, in an attempt to explore the body's physical and mental limits. "Once you enter into the performance state, you can push your body to do things you absolutely could never normally do." (Kaplan).

Communication, characteristic of naturalistic theatre, is therefore abandoned in favour of a broader communication.

The motive, then, is not just an unquestioning exercise but the kind of performance that creates substance and gives meaning.

Here the meaning is in the repetition, so that life becomes endlessly dynamic and reflexive. The cyclic movement of this form of expression evinces a concept of time

that is not characteristic of western thinking, but harks back to oriental tradition, where time was not measured by great events but flowed imperceptibly, measurable only by synchronising one's own being with the pulse of the universe.

Here Marina Abramović does not create an inflexible theatrical space, fenced off in advance, but prepares her act while taking for granted the need for a free role for the public who are no longer passive observers but play a dual part in the same space.

Because the message is the presence of the artist who introduces herself as a person addressing other people, ultimately, the message is this two-fold presence which, being human, does not require other levels of variety. Therefore the artist uses no other instruments apart from her own body, nor seeks other paths (in time and space), but resolves her own performance through an analysis of time, the point of which is not a plot line, but the adding of individual elements. The creative process relies on the possibility of summarising and reflecting on one's personal makeup, and is of course realised through formal ideas decided on in advance, such as musical rhythm, or ritual, or the harsh combing of her hair in front of a mirror, expanded through movements which spring unprompted out of the artist's inner depths and in the presence of an audience.

Thus, the time dimension takes a horizontal twist, finally breaking with the naturalistic theatre perception which relied on the temporal-physical element, within which the message was conveyed from the stage to the audience.

"In my experience, as developed in a career of over forty years, I have arrived at the conclusion that the public plays a very important and indeed crucial role in performance. The performance has no meaning without the public, because, as Duchamp said, it is the public that completes the work of art. In the case of performance, I would say that public and performer are not only complementary but almost inseparable." (Marina Abramović)

Art history encyclopaedias show the action of the *Rhythm 0* performance (Naples 1975) where the artist presents herself to the public, placing on tables various tools of pleasure and pain: the spectators are told that within the next six hours, the artist will remain passive, without resistance, and that during that time, they may make free use

of these tools. The experiment was conceived as taking place within a pre-defined time period, a strategy of John Cage later adopted by many other performance artists, the idea being to set a beginning and an end to a nonlinear event.

What began in near-silence for the first three hours, the onlookers circling the artist with some instances of intimate contact, exploded into a dangerous and uncontrolled performance; Abramović's clothes were hacked from her by razor blades; in the fourth hour, the same blades were used to cut her skin in order to suck her blood. The public had realised that this woman would do nothing to protect herself, that it was possible that she might be raped; at this point a protective group formed, and when a loaded gun was placed in her hand and her finger placed on the trigger, a skirmish broke out between protectors and inciters. By placing her body in a situation where she could be hurt, Abramović created a very serious work of art so as to confront her fears for her own body.

Marina Abramović has established a relationship of equality with her audience, which confirms its presence not by adding new content to the performance but by unfreezing its own initial position and later becoming integrated into the active area of the event. The event does not represent the classical relationship of stage to audience as experienced in the theatre, but shows itself in all its aspects. As it has not been defined in advance, it continues to form and take place in the present through the action of the artist. The action itself does not consist of a series of eccentric gestures but of alertness to internal tensions, which come to the surface through the slow emergence of a complete structure of existential and cultural behaviour on the part of the performer.

The performance, therefore, oscillates constantly between action and contemplation, between movement of the body and projection of movement. Ultimately, this physical dimension becomes the stable basis for artist and viewer to live through a protracted event consisting of endless tiny changes, with no foreseeable end to it.

Finally, Marina Abramović embodies art, with her ability to unite art and life through a performative and self-referential process that recognises mankind's situation, exposed as we are to the gusts of violence and eroticism that are surely the antipodes of our existence.

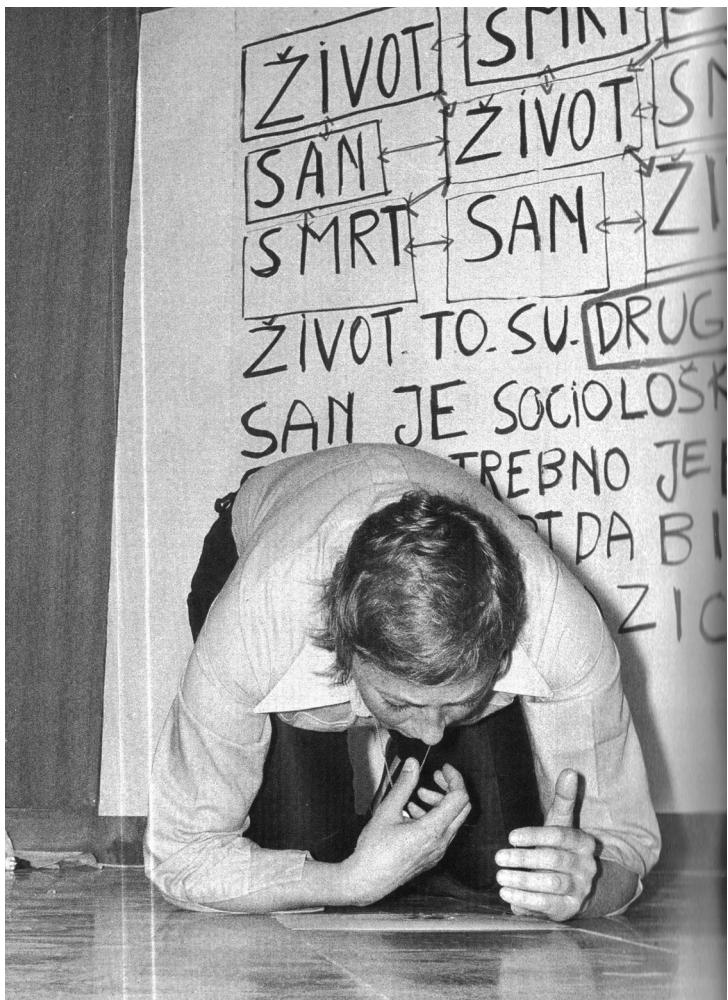
# FOREWORD



6. Marina Abramović, *Space Wired for Sound, Tumbling Building*, (sound installation), Student Cultural Centre (SKC), Belgrade, October 1972. (SKC Archives, Belgrade. Photo: Ivica Erdeljan)

To anyone growing up in the late sixties and early seventies of the twentieth century, it must have seemed like the dawn of a new epoch in which the existing social and political systems would need to be thoroughly re-examined, as no longer providing an adequate response to a world radically changed by discoveries and technology. Advances in knowledge between 1946 and 1972, particularly in physics and molecular biology and the technology to which they gave rise, led to unprecedented growth in the global economy, forever and completely changing the face of the Earth we inhabit. The ability to transmit pictures over long distances and the invention of supersonic planes and spacecraft changed the average person's experience of a world which had suddenly become smaller. Ease of travel to remote places and in particular the landing of man on the Moon in 1969 had the effect of reducing distance, changing attitudes towards space and the perception of the world as people knew it. Crucial among these new attitudes was the awareness of the indissoluble ties that bind together all life on Earth and of our dependence on one another as human beings. The ideas born at the time, mainly among the educated young, surged beyond state borders and local beliefs, no longer championing equality among countries, nations and peoples but the more effective principles of love and a universal convergence of mankind.

It was a time of relative prosperity when the unbroken economic progress of the post-war years enabled a high standard of living in the developed countries of the West and the availability of consumer goods created the impression that the world was marching confidently into the future with nothing to halt the positive train of events. Some of the more sensitive who had not enjoyed an equal share of the wealth or were more critical of consumerism, conformity and the struggle for power they generated, resurrected left-wing demands for equality, justice and freedom. The idea was that material achievements made sense only if accompanied by the practice of democratic ideals. This made it also a time of vast upheaval, dramatic social change, anti-war protest and the struggle for human rights, women's liberation, student and homosexual rights. These movements encouraged new forms of behaviour and sociality, initiating a quest for creative responses to present reality and legitimising the desire for alternative lifestyles.



7. Gina Pane, *Life, Death, Dream*, Student Cultural Centre, Belgrade, April 1972. (SKC Archives, Belgrade)

In such an environment, art could hardly remain static, continuing to turn out pretty pictures while failing to join in the re-examination and re-evaluation of everything that had hitherto gone virtually unquestioned. The nascent art of the time placed the pursuit of moral values, freedom of choice and the right to exist in one's own authentic way at the focus of its interest. The rejection of the existing social set-up, its institutions, how society was run, meant breaking with routine ways of seeing, hearing, feeling and understanding together with an insistence on new categories of morals, politics and aesthetics. The work of artists taking part in this change of values developed under the slogan: "Art is another form of action", or in Germano Celant's watchword: "Individuals against systems", giving art a left-wing aura and linking it to the ideas of Ernesto Che Guevara or Fidel Castro. An international, democratic, nomadic art emerged which, whether it dealt in various aspects of reality or linguistic experiment, targeted artistic institutions, markets and styles as representatives of a social system in need of fundamental change. The hitherto sacrosanct media of painting and sculpture began to retreat before an unwanted dispersion of methods and means, where almost anything could be used to produce art. In order to "speak in the first person" and put their ideas in the first place, artists turned to the techniques of reproduction, ephemeral materials or physical action which left no object as such behind. The various resources they brought into play, from the new media to the artist's own body and behaviour, directed the viewer's attention away from the work of art as aesthetic object and towards non-material aspects such as the artist's ideas and opinions, or the relationship of the work to its surroundings.

The feeling that mankind was on one of those curves in the spiral of history that heralds a major turnabout, a time of sudden, decisive, progressive change, inspired young artists to shake themselves free of history and tradition – including art history. This brought with it enormous intellectual, spiritual and political pressure and



8. Joseph Beuys at the Student Cultural Centre, Belgrade, April 1974. (SKC Archives, Belgrade. Photo: Nebojša Čanković)

added a sizeable dash of aggression to the art of the time. In order better to know or examine their feelings, particularly in the type of performances then taking place in Europe and America, artists reached for ideas that would push their mental and physical limits. This in turn brought pressure to bear on the spectator, who was invited to abandon cliché in favour of a more realistic experience, although this might embarrass, arouse negative emotions or even shock. In the more drastic performances, the spectator was actually forced to participate, ranging from identifying with the artist to walking out of the performance, or indeed forcibly ending it. Liberating and radicalising the artist's behaviour in an attempt to accelerate historical processes and meet events halfway drew art out of its traditional role of embellishing or affirming existing reality, so that it might help the individual to shape his or her own life, independent of prevailing opinion, the demands of the powers that be or traditional values.

In the early 1970s Belgrade hosted a number of international artistic events such as the Belgrade International Theatre Festival (founded in 1967), the Film Festival (1971), the Art Festival and a festival of new media known as *The April Encounters* which featured the latest productions and some of the most

outstanding figures of the art world. These events kept Serbian culture - or at least Belgrade - well informed as to what was going on in larger and more prominent centres abroad, and in which it was sometimes wholeheartedly included. As travel on a Yugoslav passport was easy at the time, visits abroad meant that art lovers at home were well acquainted with the international character of the avant-garde and the similarity of problems faced by young people the world over.

Marina Abramović was born in Belgrade in 1946 where she was educated and lived until she left the country in 1976. The works originating between 1972 and 1976, i.e. from her 25<sup>th</sup> to her 30<sup>th</sup> year, are therefore referred to as "the Belgrade period", as in

the sub-title of this book.<sup>1</sup> Whether shown in Belgrade, at art festivals abroad or elsewhere, they form a separate entity encapsulating all the essential elements of her art: her attitude towards the new media, her need to democratise the artistic process by including the spectator or another artist as active participants, her relationship towards art history, institutions and the artistic system, and above all, the stretching of her physical and mental limits. This period may be said to be crucial, as the principles then established became the constants of her later work. Abramović herself points to its importance: "As for as my work in Yugoslavia, it is what we call the foundation stone. This beginning of mine was very important and, of course, essential for the group of people I was working with. What we were doing at the time ran so counter to all the normal norms in Belgrade, but being part of a group gave us the additional strengths to hold out. All that work was very important for how I was to develop later and all my catalogues mention it as a very significant period in my life."<sup>2</sup>

As the interval was only six years, this book does not set out to give the chronology of events, but to illustrate her critical attitude as an artist towards the existing culture and her demands for change in the perception of art as a discipline and its role in society.

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<sup>1</sup> Ješa Denegri uses this term in: "Marina Abramović: the Belgrade Period" in which he says: "Her Belgrade period was by no means the introductory or initiatory (least of all beginner's) stage of a body of work which was to peak only later, but an important chapter and foundation of that oeuvre. It was also a very important chapter in the history of the new art of the seventies, in the environment in which her work emerged." *Sedamdesete: teme srpske umetnosti*, [The Seventies, Themes of Serbian Art], Svetovi, Novi Sad, pp. 99-107.

<sup>2</sup> Marina Abramović, *Mentalni skok* (Mental Leap), *Vreme* magazine [Time], no. 309, Belgrade, 21 September 1996, pp. 49,50, cited according to J.D., op.cit., p. 107.

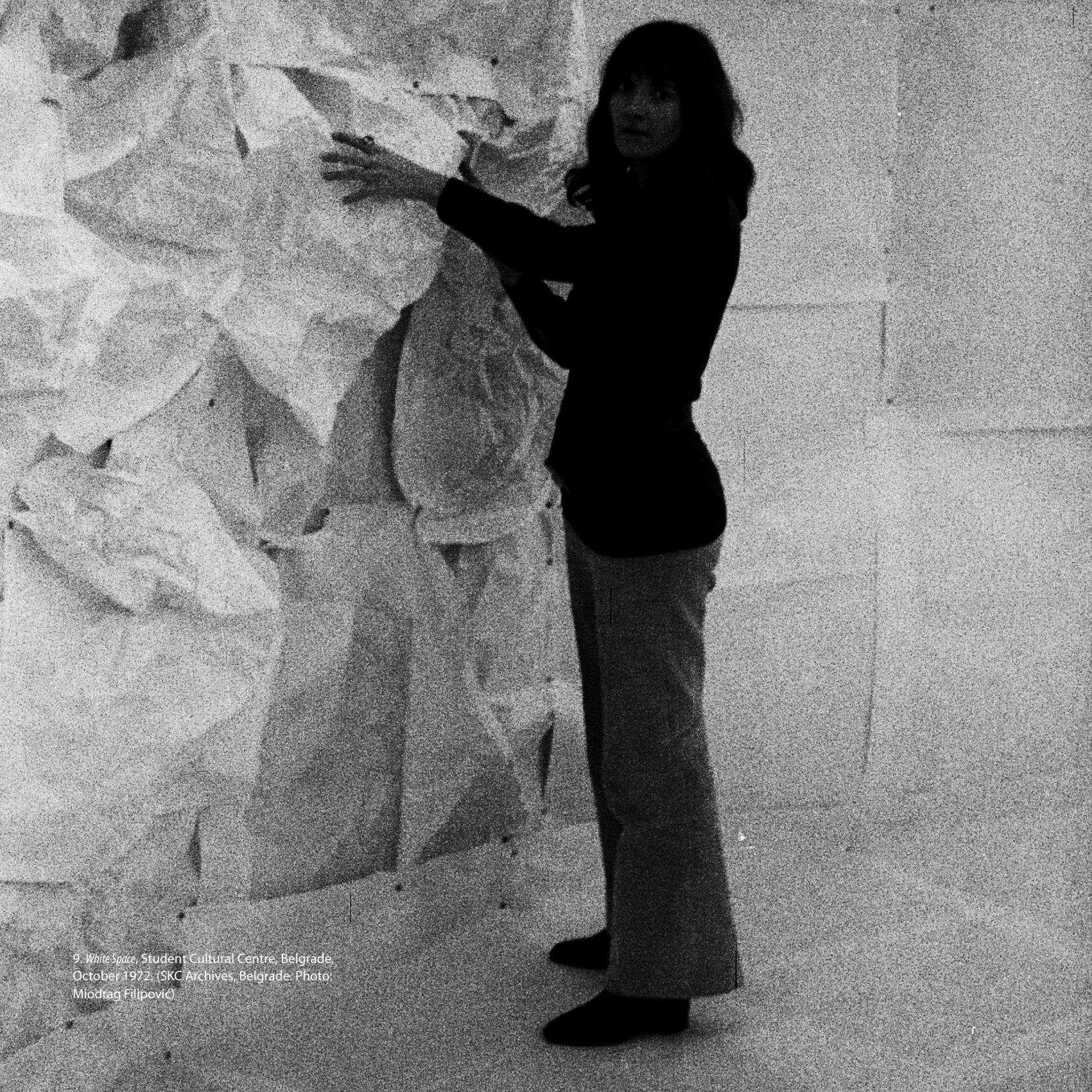
# ART AND THE NEW MEDIA

"Like sons that have grown up, like workers who have have become conscious, we are discovering that something is developing in the world by means of us – perhaps even at our expense. And what is more serious still is that we have become aware that, in the great game that is being played, we are the players as well as being the cards and the stakes..."

"What are the minimum requirements to be fulfilled before we can say that the road ahead of us is open? There is only one but it is everything. It is that we should be assured the space and the chances to fulfill ourselves, that is to say, to progress till we arrive (directly or indirectly, individually or collectively) at the utmost limits of ourselves." <sup>3</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> The quotations heading each chapter are from Teilhard de Chardin's *The Phenomenon of Man*, (tr: *Fenomen čoveka*, BIGZ, Belgrade, 1979), pp. 182,177, 209 and 183.



9. *White Space*, Student Cultural Centre, Belgrade,  
October 1972. (SKC Archives, Belgrade. Photo:  
Miodrag Filipović)

## The Group of Six



10. Group of six artists: Radomir Todosijević, Zoran Popović, Marina Abramović, Gergelj Urkom, Slobodan Milivojević and Neša Paripović. (SKC Archives, Belgrade. Photo: Milan Jozic)

The subversive atmosphere of the late 1960s, the cult of the individual and new humanist ideals were clearly present in Belgrade when, in September 1967, the city hosted its first international theatre festival, presenting the latest trends in theatre. "We plead for a new art, for an art expressed in terms of its time, the art to come, for art without borders or restrictions, for art of a new sensibility, new dimensions, for a communicative, potential, experimental, vital, open and present art of a new consciousness, non-mercantile, non-traditional, non-institutional, for an art that is neo-humanist, conceptual, scientific, technological and permanent"<sup>4</sup>, ran the catalogue for the 1970 fourth Belgrade International Theatre Festival (BITEF). The festival was organised by the Atelier 212 theatre

which had been putting on theatre of the absurd and works by writers such as Samuel Beckett, Eugène Ionescu and Sławomir Mrożek since the 1950s. In April 1968, Gallery 212 opened as part of the Atelier, home to exhibitions, happenings, experimental film and discussion on the visual arts. Artists such as Michelangelo Pistoletto, Janis Kunešis, Daniel Buren or art historians such as Catherine Milllet, Achille Bonito Oliva, Giancarlo Politi or Tommaso Trini took part in these events, organised by Biljana Tomić.

A major step forward for the new art of the seventies was the opening of the Student Cultural Centre (SKC) in Belgrade on 4 April 1971. A place to gather around artistic activities with freedom to experiment was one of the concessions made to student demands voiced in the protests of 1968. Belgrade University, the Centre's founder, saw it as a professional institution modelled on the London Institute for Contemporary Art, and envisaged it as working to a programme that would reflect current creativity in the art world both at home and abroad while linking the local

<sup>4</sup> Catalogue, *Nova umetnost u Srbiji 1970-1980* exhibition: *Pojedinci, grupe, pojave*, [New Art in Serbia 1970-1980, Individuals, Groups, Trends], Museum of Contemporary Art [MSU], Belgrade, 1983, p. 82.



11. Jackson Pollock at work.

with the international scene.<sup>5</sup> The Gallery organised the first contemporary festivals of new practices in art in the former Yugoslavia. These took place regularly from 1972 to 1977 under the name of the Expanded Media Festival.<sup>6</sup> Speaking of the SKC and the work of the Gallery, Dunja Blažević, director and editor of the visual arts programme in its early years, was later to say that this was "not just about the SKC programmes... which were alternative and complementary to what was going on in other places and other institutions, filling in the black holes as it were, providing space for things not yet visible but that existed in the form of an idea, intention or artistic practice. The SKC served more as a kind of platform for cooperation with colleagues and individuals (not institutions) from other environments with whom at the time we shared the same ideas. It was the first time that new artistic productions were initiated, financed or made possible, instead of just exhibiting finished items, and that this public space actually served as a kind of laboratory".<sup>7</sup>

Part of the first generation who had been working from the beginning with the Gallery of the Student Cultural Centre was an informal group of six: Marina Abramović, Raša Todosijević, Slavoljub Era Milivojević, Zoran Popović, Neša Paripović i Gergelj Urkom. They formed a separate group at the regular Wednesday gatherings held throughout 1971. These meetings discussed the status of young artists at the Academy and outside it, the artist's relationship to contemporary art, the artistic tradition in the context of society, politics and science, critique of the visual arts and history of art in the light of the new media and changing forms of artistic behaviour. The affinities that drew them together were criticism of the standard aca-

<sup>5</sup> For the activities of the Gallery of the Student Cultural Centre see: *Prvih 25 godina* [The First 25 Years], introductory articles by J. Denegri, *SKC kao kulturni fenomen i umetnička scena* [The SKC as Cultural Phenomenon and Art Scene], M. Šuvaković, S. Maldini, B. Tomić, D. Vukadinović, Belgrade, 1996.

<sup>6</sup> On the concept and activities of the April Encounters see: Ješa Denegri, *Profil aprilskih susreta*, [The April Encounters: a Profile], *Umetnost* [Art], No. 47, Belgrade May-June 1976.

<sup>7</sup> Dunja Blažević, *Kritičke prakse umetnosti u socijalizmu* [Critical Practices in Art under Socialism], in *Slučaj Studentskog kulturnog centra 1970-ih godina* [The Case of the Student Cultural Centre in the 1970s], Prelom kolektiv and Museum of Contemporary Art, Belgrade, 2008, pp. 97,98.

demic education they had received at the Academy of Fine Arts in Belgrade, where they were trained to take up painting in a modified modernist idiom of the Ecole de Paris, mutual friendships formed before and during their studies, similar views on life and the desire for a change in the art sector.<sup>8</sup> Although their views differed, they were united in the criticism of the art work as aesthetic object, their disputing of originality as the unique ordering of the subject matter in a painting or sculpture, and an awareness of the need for a change in the position society accorded to art. This informal group of six demonstrated their refusal to identify with the opinions of their teachers by avoiding mentioning the names of the people under whom they had studied art, a course they no longer wished to pursue.

As the formalist education provided by the Academy failed to provide them with information on what was happening in the art world, news of which trickled into the country by other means, or to give them even an elementary knowledge of the possible uses of modern technology and the new media arts, they considered themselves self-taught. For knowledge and ideas they drew on Gene Youngblood's study *Expanded Cinema*, published in 1970, the first piece of writing to articulate the relationship between the new media arts and new age culture. As an abstract painter, Jackson Pollock loomed large in their thinking. Pollock's movement around a canvas placed on the ground onto which he splashed or dripped pigment of varying viscosity highlighted the importance of the artist's body, with the artistic process taking precedence over the finished article. It also accentuated the real-time aspect of the work, its personal and social context, opening up new perspectives for the young artists and quickly bringing them to the point where they were able to abandon painting and make the transition to process or behavioural art. Working in a group made it easier for them to stand up to authority as represented by school, family and the prevailing ideology, while the mutual support they afforded one another gave each the strength to see his or her individual undertaking through to its completion. They exhibited together from 1971 to 1973 at exhibitions variously entitled: *Dran-gularijum* [Trinketarium], *Objekti i projekti* [Objects and Projects], *Oktobar'71* [October '71], *Oktobar '72* [October '72] and *Oktobar '73* [October '73], at all the April Encounters in the Student Cultural Centre, at the *Mladi umetnici mladi kritičari* [Young

<sup>8</sup> See: Catalogue for the exhibition *Nova umetnost u Srbiji, 1970-1980, pojedinci, grupe, pojave*, Museum of Contemporary Art, Belgrade, 1983; Ješa Denegri, *Sedamdesete: teme srpske umetnosti*, Svetovi, Novi Sad, pp. 94-98.



12. Marina Abramović and Neša Paripović standing next to Paripović's *Metar* at the Objects and Projects exhibition, Student Cultural Centre, Belgrade, September 1971. (SKC Archives, Belgrade. Photo: Vladimir Dobričić)

Artists, Young Critics] exhibition of 1972, at the Museum of Contemporary Art in Belgrade, at Materijali 73 in Niš, Rasponi 73 [Spans '73] in Zagreb, and at the Edinburgh Art Festival of 1973.

What is less well known is that the group of six also worked with Signalizam, a literary neo-avant-garde movement. Abramović was on the editorial board of their first magazine, *Signal*, took part in events and exhibitions, and is thought to have contributed to the movement's theoretic profile. Miroslav Todorović, Signalizam's founder, traces its beginnings to 1959 and the artists who resisted neoromanticism and late symbolism in literature by advocating principles more appropriate to a world of electronics and technology, for which reason the movement was originally entitled Scijentizam. Todorović points to 1968 and 1969 as watershed years, with the publishing of the *Poetic Science* and *Signalizam Manifests*. In 1970, Todorović launched an international magazine: *Signal*, featur-

ing visual, concrete, cybernetic and signalist poetry, hatched from pictures, posters, television, video and computers. The poetry used letters, signs, graphic symbols, graphs, photographs, collage and white paper, sound, voice, action and gesture, computers and mathematical models to free the sign of layers of semantic deposit, break the chains of syntax and grammar and bring the material features of language and the "textual surface" to the fore. From its first issue, *Signal* carried contributions by foreign artists and writers such as Raoul Hausmann, founder of the Berlin Dada in 1918, Sol LeWitt, On Kawara, Michele Perfetti, Eugenio Miccini and Pierre Garnier. Abramović published two articles: *A* and *Dim* [Smoke], in the first issue and went on to design a series of letters: *Projekcija b* [The b Projection], *Ulaženje u kvadrat*, *Izlaženje iz kvadrata* [Entering the Square, Exiting the Square] etc. She is included in the first Signalizam anthology, published as a double issue of *Signal* magazine in cooperation with the Tribina mladih (Youth Forum) and the Novi Sad *Uj Simposion* magazine in Serbian and Hungarian in 1971, and the Poesia Signalista Jugoslava Milan exhibition of 1971 in



13. Slobodan Era Milivojević, *Taping the Artist Down* (Majlinda Abramović), Student Cultural Centre, Belgrade, October 1971. Marinela Koželj, Raša Todosijević, Gergelj Urkom, Zoran Popović, Bojana Pejić, Neša Paripović. Standing: Nikola Vizner, Jasna Tijardović, Jadranka Vinterhalter, Biljana Tomić, Tomislav Božović and Ješa Denegri. (SKC Archives, Belgrade)

Maurizio Spatola's anthology *Geiger '72*. She exhibited with the signalists at shows in the Gallery of Contemporary Art in Zagreb in 1974 and at the Salon of the Museum of Contemporary Art in Belgrade in 1975.<sup>9</sup>

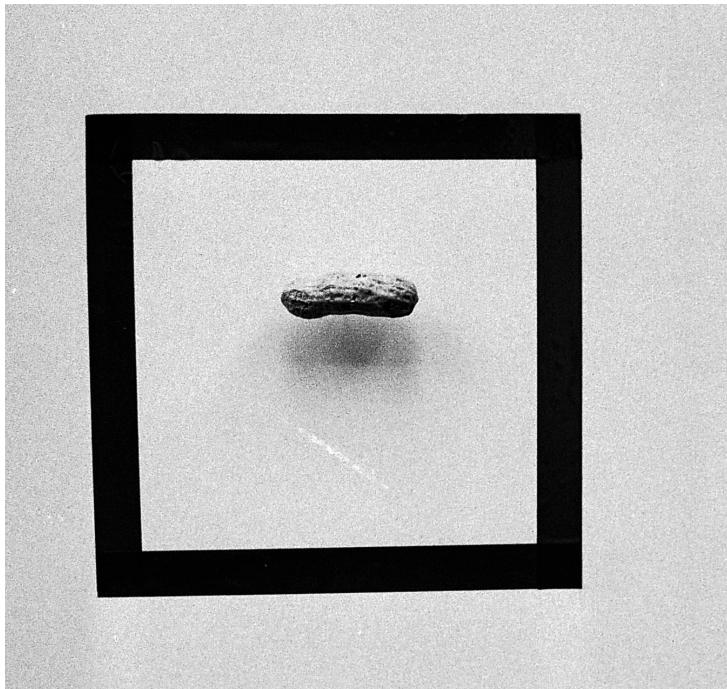
The members of the informal group of six were the first of the avant-garde in Serbia to have trained as artists, and the first to accept this position as their permanent vocation. Historically, they traced their roots to the heroic avant-garde of the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, the ideas of the Russian constructivists and the work of Kazimir Malevich. A seminal work was Lutz Becker's film *Art in Revolution*, shot while collaborating with Camilla Gray on her book *The Russian Experiment in Art*. The film excited great interest when shown at the second April Encounter of 1973, since it coincided with the thinking of local artists on art as social corrective, i.e., that whether in support or in opposition, it was

the duty of art to maintain a critical attitude towards the milieu and take active part in social change.<sup>10</sup>

The preoccupations of this informal group of six demonstrated yet another link with a past which at that point was forgotten and neglected: the Serbian avant-garde of the Kingdom of the Serbs, Croats and Slovenes in the period immediately following World War I in Zagreb and Belgrade. Whereas the historical avant-garde of the 1920s had broken with everything hitherto accepted as art, and with artistic tradition and its attendant conventions in order to challenge a bourgeois system of values which

<sup>9</sup> On Signalism see: Miroslav Todorović, *Signalizam*, Gradina, Niš 1979; Živan Živković, *Signalizam: geneza, poetika i umetnička praksa* [Signalism: Genesis, Poetics and Artistic Practice], Vuk Karadžić, Paraćin, 1994; Julian Kornhauser, *Signalizam, srpska neoavangarda* [Signalism, the Serbian neo avant-garde], Prosveta, Niš 1998; Milivoje Pavlović, *Avangarda, neoavangarda i signalizam* [The Avant-Garde, Neo Avant-Garde and Signalism], Prosveta, Belgrade, 2002. On Signalism and the visual arts: Ješa Denegri; *Zapis uz kompjutersku poeziju Miroslava Todorovića* [Note to the Computer Poetry of Miroslav Todorović], Catalogue for the *Kiberno* Exhibition in the Gallery of the Atelje 212 Theatre, Belgrade, 1969; Ješa Denegri and Biljana Tomić, Catalogue for the exhibition in the Gallery of the Dom omladine, Belgrade, 1970; Zoran Marukuš, *Signalističko slikarstvo* [Signalist Painting], Književnost, nos. 1-2, 1989, pp. 195-201.

<sup>10</sup> Dunja Blažević, *SKC i nove kulturne prakse* [The SKC and New Cultural Practices] in *Slučaj Studentskog kulturnog centra 1970-ih godina* [The Case of Student Cultural Centre in 1970-ies], Prelom kolektiv and the Museum of Contemporary Art, Belgrade, 2008, p. 95. The author points out that Becker too was fascinated and that he 'recognised this social environment, its openness towards contemporary artistic experiment and belief in the possibility of a better or more progressive society.'



14. *Cloud 1*, Trinketarium, Student Cultural Centre, Belgrade, June 1971. (SKC Archives, Belgrade. Photo: Vladimir Dobričić)

it considered passé and unsuited to democratic social ideas, the neo avant-garde of the 1970s was a refusal to instrumentalise art for ideology or financial gain. Common to both were an awareness of the position of art in the overall cultural and social context, the need for a different understanding of its nature in the particular historical circumstances, and activism in exploring the possibilities of its effect on the surroundings. Besides a utopian confidence in the social role of art in shaping reality, they were linked by their internationalism, the urge to demystify the artistic act and abolish the boundaries between the various disciplines. They perceived art as an everyday practice, the manifestation of how one chooses to live one's life.

In contrast, however, to the avant-garde of the interwar period - mainly strangled at birth, the only surviving works being those by people of independent means or who had not been recognised as artists - the group of six were recognised and

supported from the outset by individual critics, theoreticians and institutions. The most prominent was Ješa Denegri, at the time one of the very few "critics-at-work" writing on the new art. Holding to the principles of Germano Celant, of whose acritical critique he remarked that "He sees the function or objective of artistic criticism in the convergence of artistic thought and in commenting on the artistic results, deliberately eschewing any attempt at aesthetic judgement prompted by the critic's subjective associations or his ideological or political qualification of artistic opinion or preferences."<sup>11</sup> His numerous articles promoted and encouraged new artistic practices in the journals and magazines of Belgrade, Zagreb, Sarajevo and Novi Sad.<sup>12</sup> In addition, his choice of artists, the way he presented them in public and his

<sup>11</sup> Ješa Denegri, *Germano Celant i problem akritičke kritike* [Germano Celant and the Problem of Acritical Criticism], *Izraz*, 4-5, Sarajevo, April-May 1972. Cited according to: *Razlozi za drugu liniju, Za novu umetnost sedamdesetih* [Reasons for Another Line, For the New Art of the Seventies], published by Edicija Sudac in cooperation with the Vojvodina Museum of Contemporary Art, Novi Sad, 2007, p. 29.

<sup>12</sup> Ješa Denegri's collected writings covering years of promoting and chronicling the new artistic practices of trends, individuals and groups have been published in: *Razlozi za drugu liniju, Za novu umetnost sedamdesetih*, Edicija Sudac in cooperation with the Vojvodina Museum of Contemporary Art, Novi Sad, 2007.

early articles in keeping with his own ideas of individualism and cosmopolitanism influenced the way in which each of the six Belgrade artists was judged, and ensured that their work was now on record.<sup>13</sup> He supported them at exhibitions in the Salon of the Museum of Contemporary Art called *Primeri konceptualne umetnosti 1971* [Examples of the New Art of the Seventies 1971] and *Dokumenti o postobjektnim pojavama u jugoslovenskoj umetnosti 1968-1973* [Documents on the Post-objective in Yugoslav Art 1968-1973] which explained the theory behind their work and enabled their early inclusion in the history of Serbian art. Denegri was instrumental in ensuring recognition of the Serbian neo avant-garde by his writings on the exhibitions held between 1980 and 1983 in the Salon of the Museum of Contemporary Art in Belgrade, *Nova umetnost u Srbiji 1970-1980: pojedinci, grupe, pojave* [New Art in Serbia 1970-1980: Individuals, Groups, Trends]<sup>14</sup> in April 1983, and a memorial exhibition recalling the phenomenon of the group of six: *Posle petnaest godina* [Fifteen Years On], at the Srećna galerija [Happy Gallery] of the SKC in 1988.<sup>15</sup>

<sup>13</sup> *Primeri konceptualne umetnosti u Jugoslaviji*, [Examples of the New Art of the Seventies in Yugoslavia], Salon of the Museum of Contemporary Art, Belgrade, March 1971; *Marina Abramović, Polja* [Fields], Novi Sad, 1974, no. 184, pp. 22,23; Catalogue of the *Ritam* [Rhythm] 10,5,2,4, *O* exhibition at the Salon of the Museum of Contemporary Art, Belgrade 1975; *Xerax Gergelj Urkoma* [Gergelj Urkom's Xerox], newspaper of the Zagreb Student Centre Gallery, 1973, no. 40, Zagreb, 1973; Zoran Popović, *Postavka o predideji* [Idea for a Pre-idea] newspaper of the Zagreb Student Centre Gallery 1973, no. 45; article for catalogue of the Abramović, Milivojević, Paripović, Urkom exhibition, Gallery of the Belgrade Cultural Centre, April 1974; Abramović, Milivojević, Paripović, Urkom, *Umetnost*, Belgrade, July-September 1974, no. 39, pp. 61,62; Raša Todosijević, *Umetnost* [Art], Belgrade, July-September 1975, no.43, p 74; Neša Paripović, *Umetnost*, Belgrade, July-September 1975. no. 43, Belgrade, July-September 1975. Only some of the many articles are on the new artistic practice and the members of the group of six.

<sup>14</sup> Bosch+Bosch and Neša Paripović 1980 group retrospective, the Gergelj Urkom exhibition of 1981, the abridged Raša Todosijević exhibition in 1982, and Zorana Popović's *Nova ikonodulija* [New Ikonodules] of 1983.

<sup>15</sup> Catalogue for an exhibition entitled *Nova umetnost u Srbiji 1970-1980: pojedinci, grupe, pojave* [New Art in Serbia 1970-1980: Individuals, Groups, Trends]: Ješa Denegri, *Govor u prvom licu – isticanje individualnosti umetnika u novoj umetničkoj praksi 70-ih godina*, [Speaking in the First Person – Stressing the Artist's Individuality in the New Artistic Practice of the Seventies], Jadranka Vinterhalter, *Umetničke grupe - razlozi okupljanja i oblici rada* [Artist Groups – Reasons for, Forms of Work], Slavko Timotijević, *Izgled* [Appearance] Vladimir Jovanović, *Ugled izgleda* [The Reputation of Appearance], Miša Savić, *Opus* 4, Dejan Ećimović, *Grupa Meč* [Match Group], Jasna Tijardović, *Tekstovi umetnika* [Artists' Texts], Ljubica Stanivuk and Zoran Gavrić, *Hronološki pregled* [Chronological Review] 1966-1980, Museum of Contemporary Art, Belgrade, April 1983.

<sup>16</sup> Dragica Vukadinović, *Posle petnaest godina* [Fifteen Years On], Srećna galerija (The Happy Gallery), Student Cultural Centre, Belgrade, December 1988.

## Leaving Painting Behind

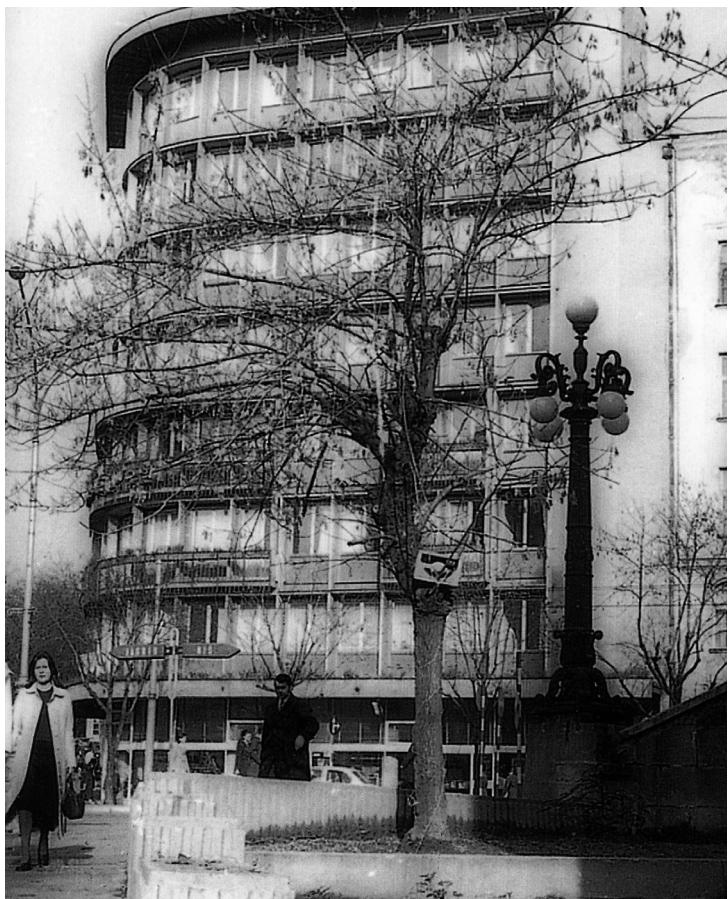
Marina Abramović tells two anecdotes about her incipient interest in the new art of the seventies, one about Branko (Filo) Filipović<sup>17</sup>, an Informel artist and family friend, concerning a picture that crumbles to dust over the summer, the other about the need for the artist always to choose the harder road in order not to repeat herself, a principle she embraced in the master classes of Krsto Hegedušić<sup>18</sup> where she trained after finishing at the Academy. The first story has to do with the transience of works of art as objects and the second with the artist's duty to accept hard work and risk. Abramović finally abandoned painting following a solo exhibition in the Belgrade Dom omladine [Youth Centre] in 1970. From 1971, she began to work on sound pieces and installations using cardboard boxes and sound recorded on magnetic tape, a medium which had become an acknowledged part of visual art - as had any other material that came to hand, thanks to the *Arte Povera* movement of the late 1960s. Use of the new media, especially tape recordings, illustrated Abramović's critical attitude towards traditional artisan techniques in painting and sculpture and her adaptation to the current technology. The use of tape recorders was widespread in the early seventies, particularly among young people because, in contrast to the radio, transistor or television set which brought the world into every home, it enabled a more democratic choice of music because of the ability to record, copy or exchange tapes. Its use in Abramović's early works evoked the historical avant-garde and Marcel Duch-

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<sup>17</sup> Branko Filipović (nickname Filo, b. Cetinje, Montenegro, 1924 – d. Belgrade, Serbia, 1997). Graduated from art school 1950 in Herzeg Novi, Montenegro and from the Belgrade Academy of Fine Arts in 1955. Further studies in France and Italy. Experimented in the mid-fifties with the use of various granular pigments – particularly sand – in the same picture, which places him among the leading lights of the informel in Serbian art. Lived and worked in Belgrade as a freelance artist.

<sup>18</sup> Krsto Hegedušić (1901-1975) enrolled at the Academy of Fine Arts in Zagreb in 1920. Pursued further studies in Paris between 1926-1928 on a grant from the French government. Set up the "Peasant School of Painting" in 1930 at Hlebine near Zagreb. Initiator and one of the founders of the Marxist *Zemlja* [Land] group of artists. Co-founder in 1934 of the *Radnički slikarski kružok* [Workers' Circle of Painters], part of the Zagreb building workers' trade union. Took up teaching in 1936 at the Academy of Fine Arts, Zagreb, where he taught as professor from 1945. Favoured a type of figurative art with social overtones. Became a member of the Yugoslav Academy of Sciences and Arts in 1948.

From 1950 he held master workshops, a kind of finishing school for art academy graduates. These were set up by official decision of the Council for Science and Culture of the Federal People's Republic of Yugoslavia (FNRJ) in 1949 and were run by the most distinguished artists, i.e. those most trusted by the state. These master artists invited graduate students of their own choice and appointed them their associates. A course at a workshop lasted four years, the same as a course of regular studies, while professorial salaries and student grants were financed *in toto* by the Government.



15. *Tree*, Student Cultural Centre, Belgrade, October 1971. (SKC Archives, Belgrade)

malism, in which the artist takes an already existing sound or silence and transmits it without intervention. However, whereas Cage used existing sound as he would a musical instrument, the substitution of mechanically reproduced sound for visual material in Abramović's works examines the classic question of nature as model and its interpretation in art, challenging current assumptions (and prejudices) about inspiration, technique and execution in landscape art.

In addition to abandoning traditional themed or narrative-based media and fine art, the installations were a kind of de-identification or negative identification, both with nature and the ambient culture. To record an audio segment from nature and transmit it in an art gallery was a rejection of the obligation incumbent on young artists

amp's opinion that the whole point of painting had been lost to an eye-pleasing retinal art. He championed an iconoclastic, destabilising art that would render porous the seemingly impermeable frontier between art and life. As he was mainly interested in artistic values, he made his point by the use of everyday objects wrenched out of context and displayed in galleries, with the idea that the work of art was comprised of the underlying thought or discovery, the convergence of things and ideas, and not the unique quality or authenticity of the piece as object.

In one of her earliest installations, *Drvo* [Tree], Abramović placed a cardboard box containing an amplifier emitting the chirruping of birds on a tree outside the SKC Gallery, artificially multiplying and amplifying one of the sounds of nature. Another atmospheric installation *Kutije* [Boxes] the same year similarly highlighted the neo-avant-garde accentuation of the complex relationship between the artistic work, nature and the cultural space. It consisted of two cardboard packing boxes, from which again the sounds of nature could be heard recorded on magnetic tape: sheep bleating, the moaning of wind and sea, a gunshot, this time inside the SKC Gallery. Her use of sound is reminiscent of John Cage's experiments with musical minimalism, in which the artist takes an already existing sound or silence and transmits it without intervention. However, whereas Cage used existing sound as he would a musical instrument, the substitution of mechanically reproduced sound for visual material in Abramović's works examines the classic question of nature as model and its interpretation in art, challenging current assumptions (and prejudices) about inspiration, technique and execution in landscape art.

at the time, which was to embrace a temperate modernism as their starting point. It cocked a snook at the prevailing concept of what constituted a picture in Serbian artistic circles, which was a realist, modern style with geometric forms or impasto. The media, the critics and subsequent interviews with the artist would then usually make the connection to his or her birthplace as the source of inspiration. Works like *Tree* and *Boxes* deconstructed this “native heath” idea and may be seen as a statement of resistance by a young, urban generation that rejected the blinkered view of the world being forced on them, both in terms of ideology and technology. Ideas of nature, like the practice of art, are dependent on history. In an age of huge strides in technology, space travel or the transplantation of vital organs in humans, contemporary artists needed to examine questions such as “What is nature?” and “What is man’s place in it?” and re-formulate their answers and attitudes accordingly.

The construction of an installation with very little visual effect that highlighted the banality of the myth of landscape painting – held aloft as a standard of fine art in Yugoslavia throughout the post-war period – deepened the rift between Marina Abramović’s art and the generation of professors who held sovereign sway in culture and constituted the bulwark of conservative opinion. For the group of six gathered round the Gallery of the Student Cultural Centre, art was no longer a thing apart, confined within the walls of the studio, to be vindicated in public in highfalutin ideology-speak, but an everyday practice accessible to all, whose aim was to change people’s thinking and the way in which they saw the world. These were young, urban, cosmopolitans who found inspiration for the expression of their own sensibility in city life, and who addressed nature and art from that standpoint. They were aware of their social role and favoured a return to values such as imagination, concentration and the play of fancy. This would allow them to run the gamut of creativity while disturbing the mindset that was keeping people stuck in a narrow rut from which they viewed the world.

In the *Šuma* [Forest] installation at the Museum of Contemporary Art in 1972, Abramović again rejected landscape painting, reminding her audience that an understanding of nature is not immanent but comes through culture and popular ideas of nature and art. The work consisted of a few chairs, the sound of wind, birds, animals and human footsteps, and the written instructions: “This is a forest. Sit. Walk. Breathe. Rest. Write

down what you experience." The peremptory tone, like a school drill, was to marshal the spectator into taking part in the execution of the work. The environment was to be the general framework, the proposition (if it was to be carried out), required the spectator's physical presence and readiness to take part. With works such as *Forest*, the visitor to the gallery could no longer simply enjoy the pleasurable stimulus afforded to the eye by landscape painting: his behaviour inside the space defined by the artist was part of the meaning of the work; he had to join in, rounding it out with his own ideas of nature, the new media or the new artistic practice.

Making art more democratic was one of the fundamental issues occupying the Belgrade neo avant-garde. To them it meant not only drawing on all the available media in producing or formulating the meaning of a piece of art, but the public too, on the utopian assumption that art was about to become part and parcel of the real life of each person, an everyday activity. In Abramović's works, there was democracy in the suggestion that the intangible aspects, such as imagination, inventiveness and fantasy, were accessible to all and that art's spiritual side was a potential strength that people could and should cultivate and develop for themselves.

In contrast to works such as *Tree*, *Boxes* or *Forest* which ruled out the visual while still assuming a relationship between the artist and a model taken from nature, *Beli prostor* (White Space, SKC 1972) broke away to examine the relationship of art to the ambient technology. In the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, attitudes towards machinery were important for the avant-garde, particularly the Russian constructivists and Italian futurists, who saw the machine as an instrument of emancipation of the downtrodden or the symbol of an industrial and technological civilisation. Neo avant-garde references to this type of environment, however, declared modernism's elitism and aestheticism invalid and criticised it for its alienation from real life. In *White Space*, a tape-recorder playing a blank tape was placed in the white-papered, oval gallery. The only sound to be heard was that produced by the running machine. The written instructions were again simple: "Enter the white space. Listen". Whereas the sound from the concealed tape-recorder in *Forest* defined the installation and transformed it into an atmospheric piece, with *White Space* even the name made it clear that this was a work conceived as a closed system to examine the tensions between man and his technical environ-



16. *Forest*, Museum of Contemporary Art, Belgrade January - February 1972. (Photo: Hristofor Nastić)

ment.<sup>19</sup> "Head-to-head with a technological reality which radically changes not only the economic and practical aspects of life but even the way in which we think and feel, it [art] rises to the challenge, testifying to the need for a clear and unambiguous statement," wrote Ješa Denegri, a critic who kept a close eye on the work of the artists at the SKC Gallery and Marina Abramović from the beginning. "On the one hand, it turns with confidence towards the prospect of technological progress, acting indirectly on individual and collective perception to give modern-day man and society a closer idea of its problems and possible consequences; on the other hand, it is a vigilant corrective that desires to keep a normal balance between some constants of the human psyche and a reality that is in a constant state of flux."<sup>20</sup>

In other Abramović audio settings such as "*Zvučni ambijent rat*" (Sound Corridor War, MSU 1971), the sound produced by a machine in *White Space* becomes the stuttering of a machine

gun, or a disembodied voice over an airport Tannoy, summoning passengers every three minutes to flights leaving for impossible destinations in "*Aerodrom*" (Airport, SKC, 1972), or again the sound of tumbling buildings against the floodlit facade of the SKC. These works use sound to breach a gap in perceptions of reality, to introduce confusion and doubt into normal observations or expectations of a reality that has become intriguing and ambiguous. On the other hand, the high decibels ruining the peace of the gallery became a form of noise pollution, an aural torture, no longer evoking mental images or recalling distant reality to the imagination as in *Forest*, but more like a physical attack, an assault on the ear, foreshadowing Abramović's burgeoning interest in the art of bodily sensation and experience.

<sup>19</sup> The catalogue for an exhibition in *October* 1972 when the work was first shown it is listed as *Zvučni ambijent – belo* [Sound Piece – White] and described as "a white, circular area resonating to the sound of a tautly stretched string".

<sup>20</sup> Ješa Denegri, *Aspekti i alternative posleratnih pokreta od informela do sramašne umetnosti* [Aspects and Alternatives in Post-war Movements from Informel to Arte Povera], *Umetnost*, Belgrade, No. 21, January, February, March 1970, cited according to: *Nova umetnost u Srbiji 1970-1980: pojedinci, grupe, pojave*, MSU, Belgrade, 1983, p. 80.

Works such as *Boxes*, *Tree*, *Forest*, *White Space* and *Airport* effected a fundamental and lasting change in the phenomenology of Abramović's art, making it part of Robert Morris's "complex expanded field", where priority is given to mental effort over the visual and formal characteristics of the finished aesthetic object. Although use was made of the new media, this was no state-of-the-art technology, merely gadgets intended for use in the home or by amateurs. However, using them put paid to the idea of art as a discipline independent of existing technology, making relative the borders between art and everyday life, and indeed between the various artistic disciplines. Typifying the technological environment, the new media enabled people to re-think questions such as: Who is the artist? What is art? What does the artistic system actually do in a modern technological society? What would be the role of the spectator in that system, and what place should the system have in the culture?



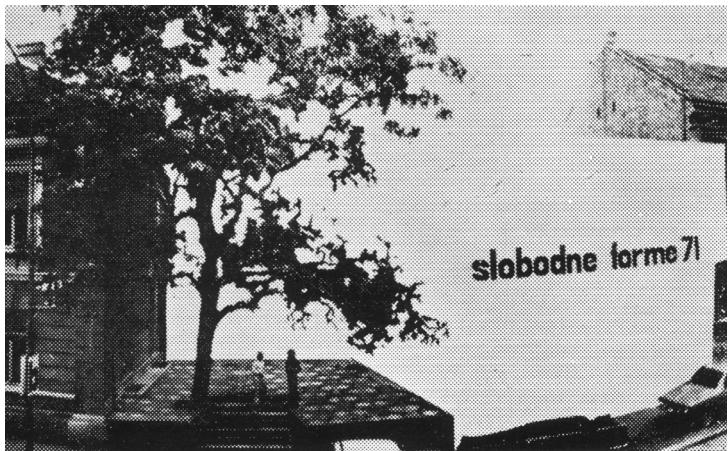
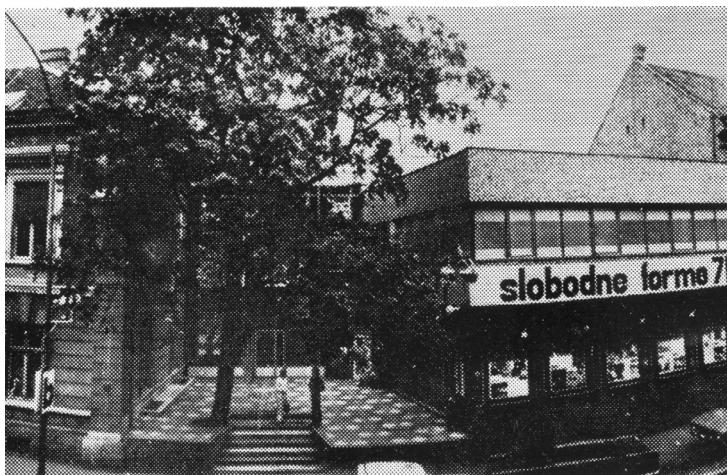
17. *Freeing the View*, Student Cultural Centre and Atelje 212 [Atelier 212 Theatre], Belgrade, September 1971. (SKC Archives, Belgrade. Photo: Vladimir Dobričić)

## Using Photography

In the early seventies, Abramović's art made increasing use of photography. Links between art and photography were close during the 1920s when Dada, surrealism and Russian constructivism tested the possibilities of this media as an artistic language. These connections revived after World War II, at the time of pop art in the USA and new realism in Europe, when photography was used as a serigraphic application inside the painted surface, making its structure more complex as with Robert Rauschenberg, or to accentuate the fatalist image of the consumer society as with Andy Warhol, or as a sort of pattern for a picture obtained by mechanical enlargement and transferred to the canvas as in Mec Art, or painted by hand as in hyperrealism.

In the new art of the seventies, where the key idea was the artist and the process, not the work as material object, photography usually served to document bodily action, to record the artist's activity outside the gallery, or interventions in nature in remote and inaccessible places. The processes of the new artistic practice, however, led to the use of photography as a medium by which the artist could create an authentic work of art. In the early seventies, photography became a means to show reality in unwanted ways and an acknowledged factor in visual art. "These are depictions of scenes, actions and events, never taken directly from reality, but that fake reality in order to synthesise numerous experiences, assumptions, allusions and messages closely bound up with the artist himself, his feelings and understanding of things and phenomena," wrote Ješa Denegri.<sup>21</sup> Abramović also used photography to document her work. Today, this is frequently the only surviving testimony of her performances and her abandonment of the existing culture, as well as being a medium through which she expresses certain mental and emotional processes.

<sup>21</sup> Ješa Denegri: catalogue for the exhibition *Fotografija kao umetnost* [Photography as Art], Gallery of Contemporary Art, Zagreb, May 1976, Museum of Contemporary Art, Belgrade, June 1976 and Salon Rotovž, Maribor, September 1976. Cited according to: Ješa Denegri, *Razlozi za drugu liniju, Za novu umetnost sedamdesetih*, Novi Sad, 2007, p. 244.



18. and 19. *Freeing the View*, Student Cultural Centre and Atelje 212, Belgrade, September 1971.

*Freeing the View* (1971) was a complex work consisting of two photographs showing the same shot of the paved area in front of the Atelje 212 Theatre and the facade of the next-door building, along which stretched a large sign announcing "Free Form 71", the slogan for the 5<sup>th</sup> Belgrade Theatre Festival. While the first photograph was a faithful reproduction of reality, the second was altered to remove the theatre and the building behind the sign so that it actually became a "free form", floating in an empty space. The third segment was a handwritten text: "Situation: you're standing; Instructions: go away; Consequence: empty space." Obviously, photographs and text were not linked as signifier and signified, but together drew the viewer's attention to the transformation in a way reminiscent of narrative art, in which photograph and text are linked.<sup>22</sup> *Freeing the View* was further complicated by the fact that two such gallery-size photographs were on display in the Gallery of the Student Cultural Centre, while at the same time two enormous blow-ups were placed near the spot where they had been taken, as art emerging from the everyday surroundings of the streetscape, transforming our experience by freeing us from our habitual way of seeing it.

*Freeing the Horizon* (1973) was a series of photographs of the centre of Belgrade in which the artist had relegated the buildings to the background and introduced a horizon into the familiar

urban scene, making them more like pictures of nature. On the back was written: "Project: Freeing the Horizon. Objective: Belgrade, Yugoslavia." This was antithetical to photography's usual function as direct visual evidence and questioned its role of encapsulating memory against the passing of time; it also raised questions of the relation between photography as established practice and the artist intervening to delete certain items, thus deconstructing and altering a basic principle: the faithful rendering of a motif at a particular moment.

<sup>22</sup> On narrative art, see: Ješa Denegri, *Pred jednom novom pojavom: Narrative Art [Narrative Art : A New Phenomenon]*, *Foto-kino revija*, 3-4, Belgrade, April 1976. Cited according to: *Razlozi za drugu liniju*, Novi Sad, 2007, pp. 250-252.



20. and 21. *Freeing the View*, June 1973. (SKC Archives, Belgrade)

Slides were made from the altered photographs and used to construct an installation in which eight projectors beamed a 360-degree view of the new cityscape on to the oval walls of the SKC Gallery. The fullness of the buildings alternated with the emptiness of the vacant spaces, presence and absence providing an imaginary reconstruction of a panorama of the city centre and injecting a new, unexpected rhythm into the familiar public space, different from reality. The piece, however, had a more significant aspect which allowed it to be considered in a poststructuralist context: a space in which to question the relationship between the structure, designed and organised as an entity, and the elements of which it was made, the alteration of which changed the entire field to which they referred. In addition to the relationship between the individual scenes projected and the entire installation, the series also highlighted the relationship between the complexities of the cultural system and the institutions established by the system as dynamic, variable elements. The buildings erased from the pictures were no random choice but frequently iconic structures such as the National Theatre, the Old Palace, the Trade Union Hall, Radio Belgrade, institutions that traditionally organised or hosted cultural events. The resulting photography was newly encoded, not only in relation to photography as the documentary medium for the motif or to the city as subject, but in relation to culture as institutionalised practice. The re-configuration of the scenery by removing the institutions in *Freeing the Horizon*, symbolically abrogated the powers of these

centres of artistic decision-making by an avant-garde clearing of the space occupied by the existing culture. Opening up the horizon in photographs of city scenes made space – if only in the imagination – for ideas of the new art which was about to emerge from life itself.



22. *220 Steps*, Belgrade 1973. (Photo: Neša Paripović)

The series of photographs created by Abramović and Neša Paripović<sup>23</sup> in 1973 and entitled *220 koraka* [220 Steps] also evince a poststructuralist view of the world. A pre-planned method was used expressively to create new structures whose meaning lay in the connection between the parts and the whole, the individual photographs and the series. The title refers to the 220 steps needed to take the photographs in sequence as Paripović, the photographer, moves away from his model, Abramović, while the setting, consisting of a road bordered by tree trunks and the tracks of a vehicle in the snow, remain the same. The language of the photography and the technical innovation which permitted the figure and the setting to move away at different speeds from the spectator's point of view, are not used simply to reproduce a real scene but to show a drawn-out mental process, invisible to the eye, which speaks of the relationship between art and reality in a complex way.

In real life, their marriage was about to end, so that the event

may be considered a joint performance showing the relationship between two people in the throes of parting. The firmly-planned method of marking the estrangement transforms the series of photographs into a chronicle of parting, or a metaphor for a relationship. In the context of the events which were to follow, the *220 Steps* might be taken as a complex signifier of the desire of one of the parties to go away, leaving her present life and the local art world behind. If so, part of the story of these ruptured connections would be the later distribution of the photographs in segments of just a couple of copies each, so that now the event exists only in writing, or in the memories of the protagonists.

<sup>23</sup> Neša Paripović (Belgrade, 1942), graduated from the Academy of Fine Arts in Belgrade in 1969. Between 1971 and 1973 he trained at Krsto Hegedušević's Master Workshop in Zagreb while also working with the group of six artists centred round the Gallery of the Belgrade Student Cultural Centre. After an abstract geometrical phase, he experimented with photography, film and video depicting his own personality and behaviour in order to question the artist's work and the process which produces the artwork. His chief interest is in the mental aspects of the creative act: inspiration, analysis, representation, the time needed for an idea to mature and the time needed to execute it, communication, and the spiritual and meditative side of the artistic process. His works *Bez naziva* [No Title] and the 1975 photography series *33 godine života* [33 Years of Life], or his films *1975 NP*, *1977 NP*, *1978 NP* and *Ritam* [Rhythm] are some of the key works of the new artistic practice of the seventies in Serbia.

The joint work resulting in the *220 Steps* examines the idea of the artist as a unique entity sending out his message to the world, an idea which was also characteristic of the poststructuralist view of that world. This is made explicit in Roland Barthes' *The Death of the Author* (1967) and Michel Foucault's *What is an Author?* (1969) which state that in contrast to the authority of the author's name, which has commanded respect throughout history, by examining the genre or variations on the same motifs in several authors, today we may see how much discourse owes to the rules of a certain literary genre, and the extent to which the work is the space in which the messages (texts) of a variety of authors clash and are reflected. The question posed by Abramović and Paripović in *220 Steps* in the context of poststructuralist ideas of authorship would be whether the author (whose idea it was) is the one who conceived the work and who appears passively in the photographs in the capacity of model, or is it the person whose job is to take photographs for the other, knowing that the photographer cannot be a less important participant in the event, a mere camera operator? In *220 Steps*, the photographer was an artist in his own right and at the same time a member of a couple in both the artistic and emotional sense – the member, indeed, for whom the relationship was the key motive of his art. The concept of joint work used in this series, which raised afresh the question of authorship, anticipated Abramović's work following her departure from the country, when she was also to work very closely with another artist who was at the same time her partner in life.

# MICROCOSM

"But even in the interest of life in general, what is the work of works for man if not to establish, in and by each one of us, an absolutely original centre in which the universe reflects itself in a unique and inimitable way? And those centres are our very selves and personalities."



23. *Rhythm 5*, Student Cultural Centre, Belgrade, April 1974. (SKC Archives, Belgrade. Photo: Nebojša Čanković)



24. Gallery of the Student Cultural Centre, April 1972, exhibition of graphics and drawings by Dragoljub Raša Todosijević, Ješa Denegri, Raša Todosijević, Nena Dimitrijević, Braca Dimitrijević, Daniel Buren, Giuseppe Chiari and Dunja Blažević. (SKC Archives, Belgrade. Photo: Ivica Erdeljan)

## First Performance

The generation of artists who arrived on the scene in the late sixties and early seventies of the 20<sup>th</sup> century felt the need to scrutinise all elements of the artistic system, from the language of art and the relation it forges with reality, to thinking, speaking and writing about art. This may sometimes be seen in the titles of their work, as for example, Joseph Beuys' "How to Explain Pictures to a Dead Hare" (1965), or "Was ist Kunst?" by Raša Todosijević, performed between 1977 and 1981. Beuys' performance dealt with the complexity of the creative process, the need to enliven fossilized thinking and rationalist interpretations of art, culture and life by introducing "imagination, inspiration, intuition and longing". Todosijević's performances on the other hand, in which he aggressively and irritatingly repeated "Was ist Kunst?" again and again in a militant tone, addressing his question to various female artists by name, pointed to mass psychology and the use of language, which by constantly repeating the same thing becomes a kind

of brain washing. Common to the works of both artists was their reference to a paradigm of reality that needed to be changed in order to open the way to new ways of thinking and behaving.

What is art? What should its subject be? How is it manifested? What are its values, its chances of engaging with contemporary problems? These were the questions raised at talks, meetings and forums at the Gallery of the Belgrade Student Cultural Centre in the early seventies. Artists, critics and historians, both local and foreign, took part in these events, as this was an era of much travel, particularly by young, intellectually curious people, for whom the suspicion and envy raised by borders between countries seemed not to exist. It seemed to herald the coming of a new age: more tolerant, more truthful and less hypocritical. It may have been the only time, not only in Serbia or the former Yugoslavia but also in the West, when the desire of artists from the most varied backgrounds to work together and get to know one another was so alive,



25. *Rhythm 10*, Contemporanea Exhibition, grounds of the Villa Borghese, Rome, February 1974, duration: 60 min. The first version of this performance - with ten knives - was at the Richard Demarco Gallery, Edinburgh, on 19 August 1973. The Rome exhibition, arranged by Achille Bonito Oliva, was an historic panorama of art, film, theatre, architecture, photography, music, concrete and computer poetry, opening in November 1973. Abramović's performance was part of Area Aperta, a special section for the youngest artists.

when there was such overwhelming social and professional curiosity and such a high level of solidarity among members of the same generation. The many events taking place in and around the Student Cultural Centre, debates, exhibitions and performances entailing collaboration between the local and international art scene, were particularly numerous during the *April Encounters* between 1972 and 1977, *Centered Ground 4 April* – Belgrade Students' Day. The Encounters revolved around the expanded media and attracted artists who experimented in the media arts, which had just gained status in the late sixties. Among them were some of the most important personalities in art and criticism of the time, such as Gina Pane, Luigi Ontani, Joseph Beuys, Ulrike Rosenbach and Ana Mendieta. Wherever they came from, the questions they asked were similar: How to create an art that would be universal and without borders? How to avoid automatic reactions and conventional responses and arrive at the states which precede them? How to establish personal relationships between man and the community through physical and mental action? How could each person become creative, independent, open to new experiences? "No written chronicle or history will ever adequately evoke the mood or recall the atmosphere that reigned throughout almost the entire Centre - not just the Gallery - during those early Encounters; no one could come close to noting or mentioning all the goings-on and those who took part in them for various reasons and occasions (not just exhibitions) that were part of the Centre's fine arts programme, particularly when it first started up in the first half of the seventies," Ješa Denegri was to recall those years with nostalgia, "Because in order to do so, it would have to be played out again: all the energy, ideas, emotions, tensions, expectations, longings, passions, stage-fright and everything else that inevitably accompanies these feelings, invested in an almost daily rush of enthusiasm by so many who are well-known and very famous artists to this day, and by others (also many) who could hardly be measured by the same yardstick."<sup>24</sup>

<sup>24</sup> Ješa Denegri, *Sedamdesete: teme srpske umetnosti*, Svetovi, Novi Sad, 1996, p. 84

The creative atmosphere, the climate of cooperation, the pursuit of alternative forms of art and readiness to experiment cultivated in the Gallery of the Student Cultural Centre were important for Abramović in making the transition from the linguistic to the anthropological. Gina Pane's appearance at the 1972 April Encounter was decisive, with her performance of *Life, Death, Dream*, a work well received in Eastern Europe and elsewhere, in the course of which she devoured raw minced meat only to regurgitate it almost immediately. In this kind of performance the body, reduced to the physicality of its own processes, was used as a unique medium via which the artist re-examined various situations, spoke of them or pointed to something that concerns mankind; the artist's body was the sign, and her behaviour the act by which art was literally returned to the elementary principles of life. For artists in Serbia at that point, this form of blending art with reality was a totally new experience which went further than examining it by means of the new media.

Abramović gave her first performance, *Rhythm 10*, at the Edinburgh Art Festival in 1973, where she had gone with the group of six at the invitation of Richard Demarco. The work involved ten knives of various sizes and shapes and two radio cassette players. There are indications that in the course of the performance, she had by her a photograph of herself as a toddler, accompanied by her father in military uniform, walking in the old fort of Kalemegdan in Belgrade. This was a biographical element that would have given the work the dimension of an intimate experience. To music randomly selected from the radio, she first painted the nails of her left hand blue, then turned off the radio and turned on the cassette recorder to capture the sound of the next part of the performance. With the fingers of the hand with the painted nails splayed on white paper on the ground, she took the knives one by one with her right hand, jabbing them faster and faster between her fingers, making five times five strikes, but changing knives each time she cut herself. When she had used up all the knives, she took a short break and then turned on the other recorder, while playing back the first part of the performance on the original cassette. The procedure of stabbing the knives between her fingers was then repeated. Cued by the gasp she had given whenever she hurt herself the first time, she managed on each successive occasion to cut herself at the same point. The work ended with the simultaneous playing of the recordings of both parts of the performance, or the double rhythm of ten different knives.



26. *Rhythm 10*, Contemporanea, grounds of the Villa Borghese, Rome, February 1974.

In contrast to sound recorded from nature and transmitted in the gallery in installations such as *Tree* or *Boxes*, the gasp of pain caught on tape was not a presentation of an absent reality but the record of an injury, like a strategy of expressionist art. With the arrival of expressionism, modern art became the site for the release of internal tension, both of artist and spectator. In the art of a performance that is not representative but takes place in real time and space with a real body and real blood, the blood, pain, or fearful anticipation of pain occur as signifiers of the materiality of the body; indicators that the human body, unlike the metaphysical or imaginary, is vulnerable and mortal. In Abramović's work, however, as later for Orlan, for instance, pain was not what the performance was about, but the decision and the commitment to carrying it out. Still, in *Rhythm 10* the body revealed in the most immediate way the effect of a traumatic experience and how trauma-generated processes work. Repeated injury as the result of suggestion in

Marina Abramović's performance of *Rhythm 10* shows how the body reacts to stimulus, supervision and control, neatly demonstrating the process by which trauma actuates or shapes an identity. Repeated injury, moreover, defines trauma not merely as a trigger for behaviour but as a limiting factor, as the element that closes the circle and hinders exit from the time frame it occupies, or as a factor preventing real change or progress.

Underlying this kind of performance was the new sensibility that emerged in the early seventies, apparent in the new film, new music and life styles, new modes of behaviour and the fashions of the time. This sensibility encouraged independence from any kind of authority: tradition, school, parents or institutions, inducing an overwhelming urge for freedom of movement and thought, for more open and straightforward relations among people and a new, more rigorous truthfulness. Seen in this light, self-harm in Abramović's performance appears as a blow for freedom from rules imposed from above, confirmation of one's own unique existence, a sign of the "verification of the artist's physical and spiritual being". In the existing social context, which she experienced as alien and hostile, and in a situation which was certainly not

just personal or local, a certain measure of self-harm was a way to announce her own existence and make a public protest against an unacceptable state of affairs. The self-harm of *Rhythm 10* was the voice of the individual raised against authoritarianism and dogmatism; it declared a revolt against rigid attitudes in order to achieve the status of an individual, the power to act on one's own authority, the chance to become the subject of one's own activities.

It is possible that circumstances in Edinburgh did not permit all the effects of the performance to be observed in their entirety, as would appear from Jasna Tijardović's remark that "the body action by Marina Abramović was performed as 'a rhythmic exercise with 10 knives' as part of a unique, collective performance of all six artists entitled ART EVENT, August 19, 1973, Edinburgh."<sup>25</sup> Any ambiguity was swept away, however, when as part of Achille Bonito Olive's *Contemporanea* exhibition at the Museum of Contemporary Art in Rome later the same year, Abramović did another hour-long performance of the work, using twenty knives. As later emerged, it was this work that finally decided her to choose body art as a sophisticated means of exploring the limits of the body, the self, gesture, behaviour, interpersonal relations and feelings.

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<sup>25</sup> Zoran Popović, *Spot* magazine, Zagreb, 1977, no. 10, cited according to: Jasna Tijardović Popović, catalogue of the *Performans* [Performance] Exhibition (1968-1978), Prodajna galerija Beograd [Belgrade Sales Gallery], Belgrade, October-November, 2006, p. 5.



27. Chris Burden, *Icarus*, 1973. Video.

## Art as Magical Ritual

Although artists in the early seventies liked to include the new media in their work and be part of the contemporary scene, resisting those aspects of the technical environment that alienated man from his own nature and opposing a materialist civilisation obsessed with getting and spending was just as important. Reaction to the current culture did not mean rejecting it or supporting a return to some primitive state of society, but distancing themselves from those aspects of reality which impoverish man's mental, sensual and emotional experience. It often manifested itself in a renewed interest in ancient or distant cultures, in oriental philosophy, Zen Buddhism, theosophy and the more esoteric disciplines. Ancient civilisations were a storehouse of knowledge of nature and

people, and had a fine-tuned sensitivity to the phenomena of the natural world - an important element in survival. Art in these cultures did not originate in the aesthetic but as a central element of ritual, part of the preparations for a certain social ceremonial that would equip the individual for communal life or spur a group of people on to accomplish certain feats. By invoking artistic behaviour in ancient or different cultures, contemporary artists were seeking confirmation of universal human values and announcing a step towards new dimensions of reality. They had a precursor in Paul Gauguin's utopian conviction that understanding the codes of faraway civilisations may contribute to reshaping one's own, and the expressionist belief that contact with a culture at a simpler level of development meant getting in touch with one's own forgotten, more natural and more authentic past .

The power of art to inspire when it appears in the guise of public ritual, its coded activity so directly affecting man, his world, energy, perception, determination and moral sense, may be seen in Abramović's 1974 performance of *Rhythm 5* at the *Third April Encounters* in Belgrade. On the ground outside the Student Cultural Centre she first drew a man-sized five-pointed star, whose double edges were made of wooden laths filled with sawdust and soaked in 100 litres of petrol. At night, during the perfor-



28. *Rhythm 5*, Student Cultural Centre, Belgrade, April 1974, duration: 90 min. (SKC Archives, Belgrade).  
Photo: Nebojša Čanković

mance, this was set on fire and Abramović circled the burning star, cutting her long hair and throwing the strands into the tips of the star, each time raising a small pillar of flame. Then she clipped her finger and toe nails and threw them on the fire as well. To end with, she entered the flaming star and lay down in the empty space at the centre, remaining there until it burnt itself out.

As the five-pointed star was the symbol of Yugoslav communism, the tendency nowadays is to interpret this work exclusively as part of an on-going political struggle. However, Abramović is known to have made it clear that she was aware that in taking on the explicit strategy of critic of society, the artist could easily be abused, as the levels at which politics and art function are so different.<sup>26</sup> Like Joseph Beuys in his time, she believes in the idea of art as an energy field between artist and spectator, and the artist as someone who transmits energy to others through her work. However, in contrast to Beuys, who considered art as a means to heal the collective wounds and generate energy for social change, the political dimension

of Abramović's art is more in the method which questions the entire structure of representation. Her attitude towards politics, then and now, rules out open ideologi-

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<sup>26</sup> Similar quandaries arose at the time the piece was first performed. Numerous articles by the most eminent critics followed Abramović's solo exhibition on graduating from the Academy. On the subject of *Rhythm 5*, however, not a word was heard from the Belgrade papers, not even as a cultural news report. Asked in one interview what it signified Abramović said: "The star is what it is. I just placed it in a different context. I was born under the sign of the star into a Partisan family. The five-pointed star has been a presence from my childhood to the present day." (Z. Jurčić, *OKO [Eye]*, Zagreb, 8 May 1974). A flat-footed interpretation might have seen it as the destruction of the symbol of the planetary expansion of communism. However, the problem was solved when, to the surprise of many, the state awarded Abramović the prestigious *Sedam sekretara SKOJ-a* award for this work. The new youth culture – even those who took part in the events of May 1968 in Paris – did not make political statements for changing the system or abolishing repressive laws. Their revolt was more a demand for the freedom to express their own subjective individuality, for personal autonomy and for shattering the bonds of state and parental power and convention. (See: Eric Hobsbawm, *The Age of Extremes*).



29. *Rhythm 5*, Student Cultural Centre, Belgrade, April 1974. (SKC Archives, Belgrade. Photo: Nebojša Čanković)

cal messages but throws out a provocation to social, cultural, aesthetic, artistic and other codes which are not just local in character, but part of the broader heritage of civilisation.<sup>27</sup>

More corroboration of the argument that setting the star on fire had no political overtones is Yugoslavia's policy of peaceful coexistence, which was in tune with the demands for peace and brotherhood of the younger generation in the early seventies. As the country at the time was not a market economy, the question of relationships among artists, galleries and dealers could not be posed in the same way as it was in the West. On the other hand, free education and health care, quality cultural events within reach of most people's pockets and the readiness of artists to collaborate and exchange experiences

created the illusion among many, both at home and abroad, of Belgrade as a mythical place where the values of the socialist East crossed with those of the liberal West. In Yugoslavia, resistance to the state of affairs in arts and the institutions was mainly a demand for the right to critical opinion, to freedom of creativity, a rebellion against traditions which had lost their original importance and were a barrier to development. Young people had grown up under self-managing socialism, which seemed on the face of it to be the solution to worldwide left-wing demands for an end to social discrimination. In contrast to left-wing students in the West, they sought intellectual freedom, the chance to reflect openly and freely on the basic questions of the relationship between art and reality, and a public dialogue on matters of culture.

The open fire used by Abramović in *Rhythm 5* as artistic material had been used before by Yves Klein and Chris Burden who also wished to transcend traditional ideas on artistic activity. Opposed to the artwork as aesthetic object, art was to be seen as a process, where the crucial factor was the artist's behaviour. In 1961, Klein had used a flame-thrower to mark the imprints of wet, painted, nude bodies on a specially prepared surface, or used the flame at the same time as a jet of water was played

<sup>27</sup> See: Marina Abramović in Conversation, with Hans-Peter von Däniken and Beatrix Ruf, cited according to "Balkan Baroque", *New Moment Magazine for Visual Culture*, no.7, Spring 1977, special edition on Marina Abramović at the *Venice Biennale*.

under pressure onto the canvas in order immediately to dry and preserve the traces of the water. In contrast to Klein, who was interested in the non-material aspects of art and the effect of accident, Burden in his video *Icarus* (1973) used fire as an element of danger to explore his own mental and physical limits. In this performance to camera, he lay nude on the floor of his studio while assistants placed one end of each of two six-foot sheets of plate glass onto his right and left shoulders and the other ends on the floor, so that they sloped like wings. They then poured petrol over the glass and set it alight. After a few seconds, the artist jumped up, sending the flaming glass crashing to the floor.<sup>28</sup>

Using fire as one of the four elements and merging with it in *Rhythm 5*, Abramović, like Burden, was confronting the limits of the body. In contrast to Burden's modern interpretation of the myth of Icarus, who escaping from captivity flew too close to the sun and was destroyed, suggesting the artist's fate, in *Rhythm 5* Abramović proposed art as helping to arouse man's interest in the spiritual life while strengthening him for the practical aspects of life. The position of the artist inside the star recalled the ancient Vitruvian theory of proportions which led Leonardo da Vinci to conclude that a man with arms and legs extended corresponded to perfect geometric figures such as the square and the circle. Abramović adapted Leonardo's model by using the five-pointed star, which imitates the outline of the human body. Symbolically, the five-pointed star or pentagram is an image of the microcosm and the number five, which is key to it, signifies the unity of unequal parts, or the unity of the number three as the personification of the male principle, the number two personifying the female. As such, the pentagram symbolises the power created by the synthesis of opposing forces, which was to become an on-going theme in Abramović's art. Performances of *Rhythm 10* in Edinburgh and Rome and *Rhythm 5* in Belgrade all had the five splayed fingers of an unmoving hand and the five points of the pentagram or five-pointed star, both representing the human body. The hand with fingers spread is used in some schools of alternative medicine as a model for the human body, the thumb representing the head and neck, the index and small finger the arms, and the middle and ring finger the legs. Only the part of the hand corresponding to the ailing body part is treated. The nail parings and clumps of hair which the artist threw ritually into the fire as

<sup>28</sup> Neil Watson, *Close Cover before Striking*, catalogue for the exhibition *Burn: Artists Play with Fire*, Norton Museum of Art, West Palm Beach, Florida, 31 March - 3 June 2001.



30. *Rhythm 5*, Student Cultural Centre, Belgrade, April 1974. (SKC Archives, Belgrade. Photo: Nebojša Čanković)

she moved around the star in "Rhythm 5" are the remains of a body, its outer border, so to speak, like the burning edges of the star imitating the figure of a man with arms and legs extended; they also resemble the skin of her splayed fingers in *Rhythm 10*, when she injured them. However, fast rhythms were more important for *Rhythm 10*, while *Rhythm 5* worked with slow ones: forming the star, soaking it in petrol, igniting it, ritual movement around the flames and finally merging with it took a whole day. The fast and slow rhythms of these two performances were like the minor and major arcana in the tarot as symbolic images of the main themes of life and what we have to learn about ourselves. In the tarot, the minor arcana, or little secrets, refer to everyday occurrences, frequently experienced and transient, the major arcana to events that are long in the preparation and leave lasting consequences. They remind us

that the artist's work is no longer to reshape or change the material she works with, but to change herself so that her own body and mind have become the subjects of art; that art is a spiritual practice, a self-liberating and self-generating experience of its own.

In modern society, with its great trust in science and logic, in political, legal and economic systems, magic is something that is rejected out of hand, or accepted only as the practice of primitive civilisations. Art, however, like magic, can be a way of reaching the deeper layers of meaning of an experience and of making that experience known to others. It can also serve to free the ego formed by society, the way society is organised, its institutions and intent, or at least contribute to softening the rigidity of its borders, to turn mankind towards the universal, where usual codes of behaviour no longer apply and there is a chance to empathise with all the forms of our complex human existence. In this vision of art, the emotions aroused by performances such as *Rhythm 5* were designed to purify and transform, as in magical art, so that man might gain a closer knowledge of himself on the one hand and be alert to alternative realities on the other.

The performance of *Rhythm 5* lasted an hour and a half, but did not end as was planned with the artist lying in the middle of the star until it burnt out. The fire used up all the oxygen in the air causing Abramović to lose consciousness and endangering her life. Fortunately, the audience noticed that she did not react when the flames reached her body, and two members of the public carried her outside. This put a stop to the performance, but the unforeseen incident prompted ideas about how it could be developed even after losing consciousness, or how to make use of the body from the far side of consciousness.



31. *Warm/Cold*: Fruitmarket Gallery, Edinburgh, October 1975, duration: 90 min.

## Thomas Lips

When Gina Pane ate raw minced meat in *Life, Death, Dream* to provoke a physical reaction, or when Vito Acconci performed simple actions to produce saliva or sweat, they took the elementary or physiological body as the primary, fundamental body which precedes socialisation and language. Self-harm, however, which is neither spontaneous nor a natural body language, is a sign by which a societal situation may be decoded. Resistance to the cultural norms and affirmation of the person wishing to take her own decisions on herself and her objectives is evident in Abramović's *Tomasove usne* [Thomas Lips], performed in Innsbruck's Galerie Krinzinger in 1975. Like *Rhythm 5* and *Rhythm 10*, the work referred not only to the physical body, but to the body formed by the social discourse, by the language it spoke and through which it is spoken, the body formed by the culture. The formal connection to previous performances was the symbolic five-pointed star drawn on the wall behind the artist and carved with a blade on her stomach, and the ritual nature of the actions she performed.

Like *Rhythm 5*, *Thomas Lips* was another complex performance, the tempo initially slow, appearing to be going nowhere but working itself up to culminate in self-victimisation and an angry reaction from the audience. Abramović first ate a kilo of honey with a silver spoon and then drank a litre of wine from a crystal glass - a metaphor for a corporal or sensory feast. The course of the performance then changed drastically: first she broke the glass with her right hand, then carved the five-pointed star with a razor blade on her stomach, tip pointing downward, whipped herself until she was spattered with blood and no longer felt any pain, and finally lay naked on a cross made out of blocks of ice under a heater placed above her stomach, which increased the bleeding from the star-shaped wound. She remained for thirty minutes on the ice although her back began to freeze and eventually the audience stopped the performance by pulling the ice out from under her.



32. *Thomas Lips*, Galerie Krinzinger, Innsbruck, November 1975, duration: 120 min.

*Thomas Lips* at first glance recalls the work of the Viennese Actionists, most of whom began their careers as painters, but from the late sixties opted for a shocking, sensationalist type of art. Hermann Nitsch gave long-drawn-out performances featuring a great deal of noise and blood, a frequent prop being a butchered animal, its entrails extracted and smeared over a nude female or male performer. Ritualised performances with animal carcasses and blood, accompanied by shouting and deafening sound effects, were supposed to increase the sensory thrill achieved by unbridled disorder, sadomasochistic outbursts or orgiastic eruptions which gave full rein to those parts of human nature usually kept in check by civilisation. The activities were supposed to bring to life latent aggressive instincts and open the way to artistic and social liberation.<sup>29</sup> Although Abramović took part in one of their rituals in 1975 at Schloss Prinzendorf in Austria when, nude and blindfolded, she was sprinkled with animal blood, in her own performances she does not strive for destructiveness, still less for sensationalism. Her work is closer to that of Gina Pane, for whom the method of self-harm is designed to show that the body is subject to mental, social, economic and sexual forces.

In *Psyche* (1974), Pane etched a sign in the form of a cross on her stomach with a razor blade, because for her art was a way of testifying to physical identification with suffering in society in the full sense of the word, and an expression of the wish to participate in a cleansing process. In this performance the body stood for the place of origin of the suffering, and the cruciform sign and procedure defined as "blood letting" were purifying activities. In radical body art performances, the body is considered the site where the conflict between the individual and the world begins and where it should be settled.

*Thomas Lips* was preceded by *Toplo/hladno* [Warm/Cold] performed at Edinburgh's Fruitmarket Gallery in October 1975 and which raises the same questions in a somewhat

<sup>29</sup> RoseLee Goldberg, *Performance Art, from Futurism to the Present*, Thames and Hudson, 1996 pp. 163,164



33. *Thomas Lips*, Galerie Krinzinger, Innsbruck, November 1975.

simpler form. Here Abramović, seated at a table on which there was a block of ice, kept her hand on a piece of glass laid across the ice with a heater turned on above. After a considerable interval (the performance lasted 90 minutes), extremes of hot and cold produced a reflex movement in the hand of such force that the glass was broken. Despite this, she continued to keep her hand on the ice until the audience intervened to stop her. The key elements in this performance were the involuntary, unexpected and violent behaviour of the body exposed to contradictory pressures, the concentration and self-control of the artist in continuing the action, followed by the forceful reaction from an outraged audience. The photographs displayed behind the artist had been taken during a performance of *Rhythm 2* in which she explored her body's reaction to two drugs used in the treatment of severe forms of schizophrenia, one which causes the muscles to contract uncontrollably, the other which relaxes them, also uncontrollably.<sup>30</sup>

Although *Thomas Lips* uses contrast by opposing ice and heat as an artistic means, it is on a different spiritual plane. The performance is reminiscent of a biblical parable of pleasure and guilt, sin and punishment, desire and suffering and outlines a reality that is rigid, unbending, hampering man's need for knowledge and development. Carving a bleeding star, whipping herself and lying between an icy surface and a heater which increased the bleeding are recognisable signifiers of the oppression of a patriarchal society and the invalidation and objectivization to which it leads, while the use and abuse of

<sup>30</sup> *Warm/Cold* was the partial realisation of an idea earlier proposed for the opening of the *Biennale* in the Musée d'Art Moderne de la Ville de Paris, for which a bed was required made of ice blocks measuring 80x200x60 cm. On this Abramović would lie nude, while five simple lamps hanging from the ceiling to a level of about 50 cm above the ice bed would be placed over her head, chest, stomach, knees and feet. The Museum rejected the proposal. The pieces later performed in Edinburgh and Innsbruck show just how important for her at that point was the idea of bodily behaviour in conditions of contradictory extremes. They also show Abramović's tenacity in overcoming obstacles. She tends to think that if an idea is not carried out, it does not exist, because the fact that it did not come to fruition shows that the energy it mobilised was insufficient to initiate the action which would make it reality.



34. Thomas Lips, Galerie Krinzinger, Innsbruck, November 1975.

the body was an act which gave voice to the unsaid and unsayable. The entire performance may be considered a protest against bourgeois norms and rules as decreed by authorities who invoke tradition to impose rigid patterns of living and obsolete forms of life.

The great anti-authoritarian revolt and the new sensibility that arrived in its wake insisted on an ethic that would understand freedom as the necessity to discover and realise all man's potential. Any repression could only be in the service of protecting and enhancing life. "The advent of a free society would be characterised by the fact that the growth of well-being turns into an essentially new quality of life," wrote Herbert Marcuse. "This qualitative change must occur in the needs, in the infrastructure of society. The new direction, the new institutions and relationships of production must express the ascent of needs and satisfactions very different from and even antagonistic to those prevalent in the exploitative societies. Such a change would constitute the instinctual basis for freedom which the long history of class society had blocked."<sup>31</sup>

Freedom in the revolutionary seventies meant new ideas on

human relations, particularly in love, sexuality, marriage and family, along with demands, primarily by young people and marginalized groups, for the right to decide for themselves. Among these ideas of freedom, it was acknowledged that relationships could only be based on emotions, hitherto a scarcely acceptable attitude. Backing the idea of change in human relationships were: simplified divorce procedure, birth control, the legalisation of abortion and the possibility of alternative forms of conjugal life. For this, however, more tolerant and humane codes of behaviour were required, particularly a new morality which would respect equal sexual rights and freedoms while freeing the body of the stigma of its supposedly impure nature.

In this social context, the point of performances such as *Thomas Lips* was not in expressing or discussing intimate matters. The concept was a universal one: to make people

<sup>31</sup> See: Herbert Marcuse, *The End of Utopia and An Essay on Liberation*, (tr.) Stvarnost, Zagreb, 1978, p. 136

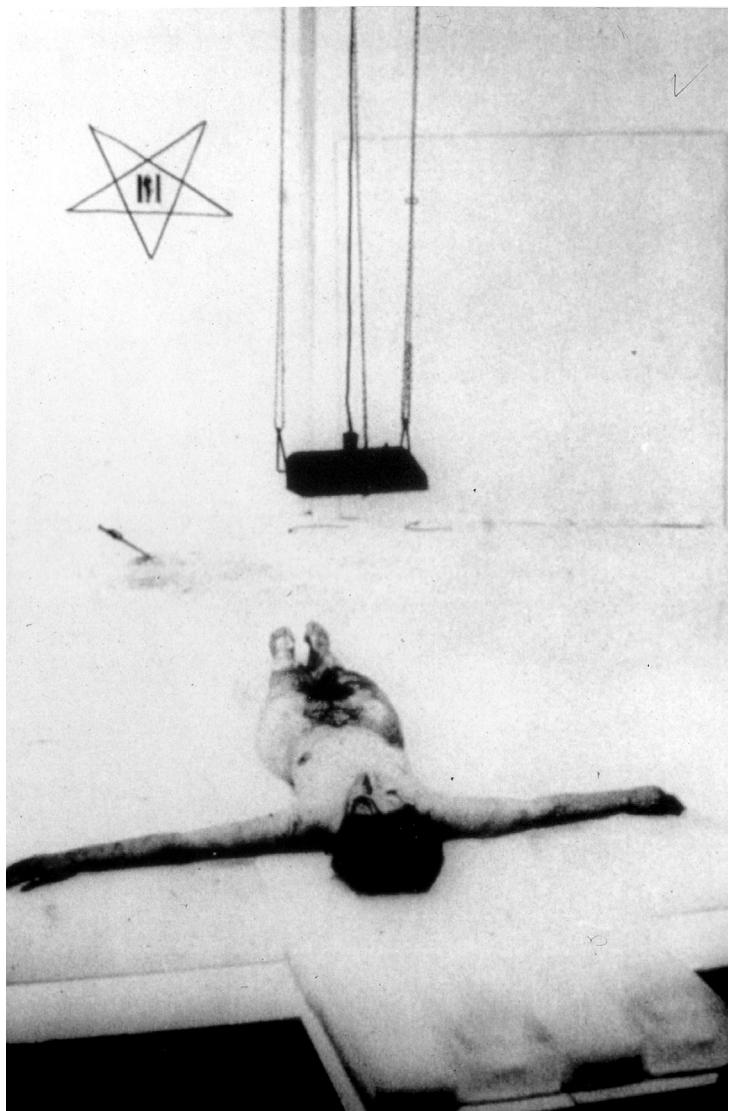


35. and 36. *Thomas Lips*, Galerie Krinzinger, Innsbruck, November 1975.

more aware of what needed to be redefined in the culture and society, because the system of values which had constituted them had changed. These performances were there to throw light on questions such as: How to speak on subjects that were taboo when it was forbidden to even think of them? How to face up to a situation of great pressure requiring an urgent solution when there was no one to talk to, or when matters were arranged so as to prohibit conversation? How would someone fare when trying to manage his own life? How would he be able to face the new and unfamiliar, knowing he must take decisions and risks while being prevented from taking action or responsibility and at the same time being obstructed by adverse criticism?

For *Thomas Lips*, Abramović drew a pentagram on the wall behind her with the Roman numeral III in the middle, which may have referred to 1973, 1974 and 1975 when she gave one performance each year in which the sign of the star appeared. All three stars of her Belgrade period take as their theme some aspect of human experience, the connecting thread being injury, whether addressing the need to free herself of trauma in order to avoid forming an identity as in *Rhythm 10*, transcending the physical body through purification by fire in *Rhythm 5*, or escaping in *Thomas Lips* from a violent and oppressive culture that stifled the individual. For the artist, these performances were a pledge

to clear up any confusion that either followed some internal growth spurt of her own, or because of problems in understanding the complexities of the experience when crossing certain thresholds; as far as society was concerned, they demanded change of a situation which would allow no negotiation or admit any other point of view. At the bottom of these performances lay an attempt by a generation of people to free themselves from dominance and power, conditioned experience and a culture of control. If the artist giving the performance spoke in the first person while her work posed questions about the point and meaning of art, the individual, his identity and place in the world, this was not about the fate of one person, but an experi-



37. Thomas Lips, Galerie Krinzinger, Innsbruck, November 1975.

ence shared by an entire generation. So although during the performance it might look as though the artist was trying to provoke, damage or disrupt the social harmony, the activities nonetheless implied a certain degree of social exchange and a social objective.

This objective resembled that of rites which overstep prohibition and taboo in order to purify life and make it spiritual. What *Thomas Lips*, *Rhythm 10* or *Rhythm 5* share with magical art is that the activities of both influence emotions that are present in the here and now, and are needed to smash the structures that keep man in a semi-sleep, or half-life. The emotions they prompted were intended to increase the mental energy required for everyday life. The world hands us nothing in advance, nothing certain or lasting, and the development of our own inert energies is one way of countering this. In this sense, ritual, self-harming performances that include the sign of the star like an image of the microcosm or the cosmic dimensions of someone who wants to identify with the ideal, preserve the links between art and man and his need for self-fulfilment; in other words, paradoxical as it may seem, they serve a practical purpose. "Art that refers to itself is only possible in decadent societies and can only exist in cities," Abramović was to say later in an interview. "Art objects lose their functionality as soon as we enter a desert or another place outside a city. Originally, art had no auto-referential context, rather it started referring to the human being and his need for rituals and religion."<sup>32</sup>

Ritual in Abramović's performances, including the blood-soaked pentagram and fire, actions which evoked purification, unification or sacrifice, also meant an interest in man and the civilisation he has created. In order for change to yield results in culture, art or society, it must begin with the individual, and not only his behaviour, thinking and view of the world: it must be fundamen-

<sup>32</sup> Cited according to: Dobrila De Negri, *Marina Abramović*, *Pro Femina*, no. 8, Belgrade, autumn 1996, p. 233.

tal enough to encompass his biology, his metabolism, his very tissue, his conscious, these works seem to say. Revolutionary change cannot come from without, through "the forces of production", as was the catchword of the time; the only real revolution is that which takes place within man. Man, then, was the on-going subject of Marina Abramović's art, while the social role of her performances which took her to the edge of physical, mental and even social endurance, was – like that of ritual art - to develop and cultivate a morality of dedication, strength and perseverance.

# MOVING THE BORDERS

"So let us bow our heads with respect for the anxieties and joys of 'trying all and discovering all.' The passing wave that we can feel was not formed in ourselves. It comes to us from far away; it set out at the same time as the light from the first stars. It reaches us after creating everything on the way. The spirit of research and conquest is the permanent soul of evolution. And hence, throughout all time, unity of movement."



38. *Rhythm 2*, Gallery of Contemporary Art, Zagreb  
October 1974.

## The Physical Aspect of Consciousness

The idea of Christian man as a suffering being was mainly responsible for the fact that historically, body and soul have been considered as an opposite pair. This has been extended to other differentiations: external/internal, own/other, depth/surface, psychology/physiology, matter/form, true/apparent and so on. In a binary world, we have come to consider the body and consciousness as being in opposition to each other or as a dichotomous pair, with one of the members easily excluded and replaced by the other, depending on context. This created the impression that the body has no consciousness, or that the mind is independent of the body's physiological state. Nowadays, however, it is possible to prove that electrophysiological processes correspond with conscious phenomena, that the body is also an indicator of consciousness. There was a growing readiness throughout the 1960s to redefine theories that marginalised the body as something the spirit must eliminate if it was to preserve its "integrity"; the idea was abandoned that the mind was restricted to the intellect and intellectual activities in order to control nature. This was a time of renewed perception of the body as the physical nature of consciousness. By improving one's knowledge of the body, one might come to know the mind better as a complex, specialised tool with which to confront the world. Those years saw a renewed interest in experiences such as meditation, pain, fasting, sensory deprivation and certain states of consciousness induced by the use of psychedelic substances, so that cultivation of the mind, long the tradition in other parts of the world, might be renewed in rational-insistent Western societies. Medicine reverted to alternative psychophysical methods of healing. Philosophy, too, saw a return to the monism of Spinoza, a premise whereby all existence is the result of transient and provisional attributes of a necessarily existing absolute and infinite substance with countless attributes through which it manifests its nature. In this philosophy, an individual entity such as a human being is shown as the mere result of various aspects of this same substance, while body and soul are considered as specific modalities and determinants of it, in interaction with the determinants of other things.

Abramović's *Rhythm 2*, performed in 1974 at the Gallery of Contemporary Art in Zagreb, also dealt with overcoming the dualist division of body and spirit and pointed



39. *Rhythm 2*, Gallery of Contemporary Art, Zagreb, October 1974, duration: 6 hours.

to their interdependence. In it, the artist used her own body aggressively in order to attack binary opposites such as soul/body, consciousness/matter, internal/external, health/sickness, nature/culture. The piece consisted of ingesting potent drugs used in the treatment of hospitalised patients and exploring their effect in full view of a Gallery audience. While under the influence of the first tablet, usually given to catatonic patients in order to get them to move, the artist, although conscious, was unable to control violent muscle spasms. Due to its altered biochemistry, her body was behaving independently of her conscious mind. When the effect of the pill had worn off, she took a short break during which she and the audience listened to folk songs on the radio. She then took a second pill, used to tranquillise violent schizophrenics. She first felt cold, and then lost all consciousness of who and where she was. From a photograph of the event, we can see mental disturbance resulting in a drastic change in behaviour, even if we do not know what the artist is experiencing internally - the body's response to artificial stimulation of the nervous system.

As the behaviour of an artificially stimulated body is not the real expression of the internal life of the person - an idea dear

to the romantics - but a physical reaction which throws doubt on ideals of the power and omnipotence of nature, a performance that demonstrates the extent to which a state of mind is linked to body chemistry and vice versa underlines the dubiousness of prejudices about the inner being, the soul of the artist as a romantic pledge of the human essence. On the other hand, however, the performance also functions as social critique, because it points to the astonishing simplicity with which behaviour can be manipulated, to the psycho-physical body as something easily influenced, something that can easily be turned around to serve other purposes. Thus *Rhythm 2* questions the concept of man as intact and unalterable, and goes some way towards deconstructing ideas of the person as representative of the truth about him or herself, an independent factor rooted in reality and history; this was going a step further than simply addressing the unity of body and consciousness as a theme.



40. *Rhythm 2*, Gallery of Contemporary Art, Zagreb, October 1974.

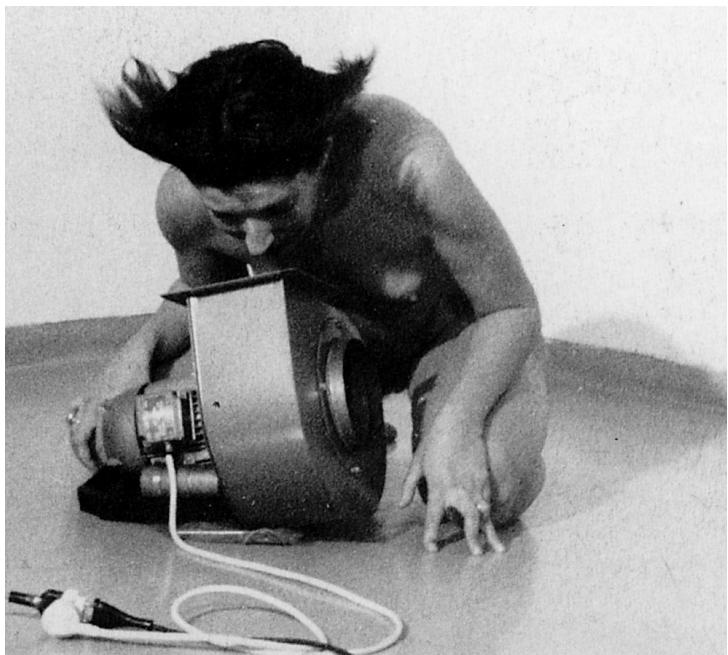
idea that preceded the work and underwrites it. It is part of the preparation for action which is not only physical but involves projection, decision-making, risk acceptance, readiness to face the unforeseeable consequences of passing from inertia to action. If the written instructions documented the emergence of the performance, photography was the clue to the process (in the event, the piece was not videoed). The camera registered a moment in the real time of the performance, but nonetheless demonstrated convincingly how drastic, violent change can affect the soul by changing the chemistry of the body. In the course of a performance that lasted six

The change in behaviour resulting from a change in the state of the body was not spontaneous or arbitrary. The structure of the performance and how it would be videoed had been set out in detail in advance: "A white space lit by twelve 8 kw spot-lights. I record the event onto two super 8 mm static cameras, one trained on the audience and away from me, the other on me from the audience. I use my body only as a means to demonstrate psycho-physiological reactions to taking certain tablets (drugs for treating acute schizophrenia) whose effect on my body is unpredictable. I take two tablets while facing the audience. I take the first, examine its effect (the reaction consists of muscle spasm which I am unable to stop although I am completely conscious). I take a break, during which I turn on my transistor and listen to a randomly selected programme while I prepare to take the second tablet which tranquillises the body and switches off my consciousness. Regardless of this state of affairs, the action continues until the effect of the second tablet wears off." <sup>33</sup>

The instructions look like a somewhat superfluous explanation of the work, but can be seen as extending the performance in time, since the text is seen before the piece and remains to document it. A text that accompanies a work provides a clue to the process of planning and deciding. It reminds us of the

<sup>33</sup> Catalogue for the exhibition: *Nova umetnost u Srbiji, 1970-1980, pojedinci, grupe, pojave*, Museum of Contemporary Art, Belgrade, 1983, p 98.

hours, a body with altered chemistry produced a reality different from the usual one, the reality of another person, suggesting that the human body is only one of the structures which can be entirely transformed by tinkering with one of its elements. By using medical drugs to temporarily block the person's usual behaviour, another personality is substituted for the duration of their effect. This goes to show that artificially initiated change of this kind can temporarily alter the normal psycho-physical state; what is more, it has the potential to alter it in the long term. What made *Rhythm 2* particularly grim was the awareness that a person's identity can quite easily be refigured by tinkering with the biochemistry, independently of any critical evaluation of the drastic impact this might have.



41. *Rhythm 4*, Galleria Diagramma, Milan, December 1974, duration: 45 min.

## To the Borders of the Body, Consciousness and Beyond

Exploring the borders of mind and body, or dealing with bodily behaviour as a potential reality of the conscious, appeared in even more drastic form in *Rhythm 4*, a piece that seems partly to lie on the other side, beyond the borders of consciousness. In late 1974, *Rhythm 4* (four being the number of its place in the *Rhythm* cycle) was performed in two rooms simultaneously at the Galleria Diagramma in Milan: in the first was the artist with an industrial-strength ventilator in front of her, and in the second the audience, who could follow the work on a video screen. This spatial separation of performer and spectators later resulted in a disparity between the actual event and the audience's perception of it. Having placed herself nude before the ventilator, Abramović deeply inhaled the air blown at her under tremendous pressure. Very soon, she lost consciousness

and collapsed. This was lost on the audience watching the performance on the monitor, however, because the camera continued to show a steady stream of air moving and changing her face, without making it clear that she had in fact fainted. The piece lasted another three minutes, so it may be said to have used the body in both its conscious and unconscious states. The artist's confrontation with her physical limits literally reached the final frontiers, maximum endurance, the border that divides life from death. As in *Rhythm 2*, the work took for granted the total reality of the body, persuasively arguing that the conscious is not separate from the body's physiology, just as the body is not something opposed to the conscious, and that this is not a matter of intellectual speculation.

At the heart of *Rhythm 4*, as in other performances by Abramović between 1973 and 1976, the sole idea seemed to be that of borders: finding the borders of the possible, moving them, setting up new ones. It might be said that if Abramović's work represents anything, it is that borders are changeable, open, always a work in progress. In her performances, the border is manifest in the body; it is the medium which reports

on the border, the site where it is made known and again redrawn, in order to make room for new information and insights. The border that is transcended in Abramović's performances does not surround a clearly defined territory beyond which there is nothing more; neither does it signify any real transition into the exterior, but rather entry into a space which lies between whatever it is that forms the physical, mental or cultural borders at that particular moment, and death as the only thing that could lie beyond. When the performance arrives at the psychophysical limits, therefore, this does not mean that the artist exits into exterior space, she merely redraws the boundary line. The fact that the borders are never definitively set, but may be moved and redrawn again and again, encodes the idea of freedom of movement which can take place inside oneself: as an energy transformation, as a passage from one state of consciousness to another, as transcendence of the self. The various states of the body-cum-consciousness are a natural phenomenon latent in everyone, the objective of which is to bring the human being in the course of evolution to a heightened level of existence, to reach the physical and mental limits and make known the body's conscious, which serves to keep us oriented and connected to other forces of nature. Therefore it should, at least in principle, help to bring our sensory and mental abilities closer to realising their potential – which is always greater than what we know or assume it to be.

Performances that examined borderline states and mental and physical limits turned the gallery into a laboratory for testing new concepts of endurance, not only the artist's own but the spectators' as well. The visitor to the gallery risked attending a performance where the audience not infrequently intervened to put a stop to it. Together with the artist, the spectator stepped into an unknown terrain inhabited by his or her own demons, such as fear of death, injury, madness etc. These borderline experiences, however, were not to reveal suppressed fears in order better to adjust individual behaviour, as in psychoanalysis. Like shamanistic rites, the activity was supposed to act on the lower strata of consciousness in order to encourage total awareness of the self and gain a better insight into external reality. Abramović's body art during her Belgrade period has no plot in the sense of narrative or intrigue; it does not dabble in metaphysics, metaphor or symbols but chooses a simple situation, concrete and literal, intended through its unexpectedness to act as a shock or trigger.



42. *Rhythm 4*, Galleria Diagramma, Milan, December 1974. Part of the performance which the public was able to watch on a monitor in another room.

Abramović's actions avoided an intellectual level of communication, preferring to provoke a physical experience on the part of both the artist and the spectator who identified with her. This result was the exact opposite of what occurs in catharsis. In the Aristotelian concept of catharsis, the visitor left the theatre in a state closer to an ideal balance of the emotions than when he came in. The pity and fear evoked on the stage - particularly in the tragedies which were designed to that end - and their dramatic dénouement freed him of negative feelings which risked weakening his readiness as a citizen to defend the city. However, after an Abramović performance – or similar pieces involving self-harm - the visitor is left flooded by emotions that range between identification and complete rejection. In catharsis, the emotions are drained immediately so as not to impede everyday life, whereas in radical art of this kind they are crystallised and used as a source of psychic energy, a stimulus to transform our ideas of ourselves and the world.

Considered in this light, the drastic element in Abramović's performances, whether lengthy and complex or simple body art, was never an end in itself, nor was the objective suffering or death. On the contrary, introducing them was meant to show how objective reality could be experienced in a different way, and how the life force could be increased. The uneasiness

they aroused by their departure from the usual approach to art and the social environment was supposed to prod people into going beyond the borders of the familiar world, arriving at a state of illumination or clarity of mind which, if not lasting, would at least be an ideal to strive for. These works, however, were still art, as they were based on a key artistic premise. "The relationship between conscious and unconscious, planned and accidental, project and realisation – all these basic principles of artistic creativity, regardless of time, style or technique, are at the heart of each of Marina Abramović's works, except that in this case, the relationship is examined in the person of the artist herself, and not in the work of art as a material product sepa-

rate from her existence as a person," wrote Ješa Denegri. "Although the acute effect of the expression, in many cases troubling to the point of being unbearable for the sensitive viewer, outlandish and repellent even for many accustomed to extreme forms of contemporary art, Marina Abramović's physical action and performances are not at all confessional with a message of social protest. On the contrary, their language evinces very clearly conceived and enacted procedures which – like any others in contemporary art – enjoy and seek respect for their own artistic set of laws."<sup>34</sup>

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<sup>34</sup> Ješa Denegri, *Sedemdesete: teme srpske umetnosti*, Svetovi, Novi Sad, 1996, p. 106.



43. *Rhythm 0*, Studio Morra, Naples, February 1975,  
duration: 6 hours.

## The Observer as Participant

Because Abramović's performances between 1973 and 1976 were based on the idea that art should revert to life and the quotidian as in the early societies, the active presence of a viewer was always important to her work. This was most clearly expressed in *Rhythm 0*, the last in the Rhythm series, performed at the Studio Morra in Naples, in which the spectators acted as collaborators and – to an extent – autonomous performers. Although *Rhythm 0*, like other Abramović works, explores mental and cultural structures and dualisms such as internal/external, fixed/changeable, planned/accidental, passive/active so as to include unpredictable reactions, unforeseeable consequenc-

es, even a fatality, the viewers clearly played a key role, because without them the work could not have taken place. In a Latin country where passions ran high and male-female relations were not notably emancipated, the artist opted to stand for six hours motionless and impassive in a gallery from 8 in the evening to 2 in the morning, thus giving freedom of play not to the imagination, but to action by the public. This was prompted by the instruction: "On the table are 72 objects that one can use on me as desired. I am the object. During this period, I take full responsibility." Among the items laid out were a gun, a bullet, blue paint, a comb, a bell, string, lipstick, a penknife, a fork, perfume, cotton, flowers, matches, a candle, a Polaroid camera, a feather, chains and many other dangerous and bizarre items. The artist was thus literally and completely exposed in her physical person to the activities of the participants, as the two spheres had been merged, abolishing the distance between them. She had neither physical nor symbolic protection against her own explicit and provocative challenge to the public as she stood impassively before them. On the wall were photographs of the mutilation she had inflicted on herself during *Rhythm 10*.

The public did not pass up the chance. "It began tamely," Thomas McEvilley wrote later, "Someone turned her around. Someone thrust her arm into the air. Someone touched her somewhat intimately. The Neapolitan night began to heat up. In the third hour all her clothes were cut from her with razor blades. In the fourth hour the



44. *Rhythm 0*, Studio Morra, Naples, February 1975.

same blades began to explore her skin. Her throat was slashed so someone could suck her blood. Various minor sexual assaults were carried out on her body. She was so committed to the piece that she would not have resisted rape or murder.”<sup>35</sup> In the mental space set free by the artist’s passivity, the public vented its social and psychological response manifested as aggression, frustration and desire. In the most personal way, patterns of behaviour, the intentions lurking beneath a smooth exterior, the faces behind the masks, all came to the surface.

By switching the roles of artist and public and challenging the conventions that ordain who does what, *Rhythm 0* again underlines that it is not the artist showing her private emotions in performance, she rather points to the emotions she shares with her public, to human emotions in general, that she speaks of experiences familiar to all and which should be made known. Although artists do not speak of themselves in their works (or at least not just about themselves), or try to understand the world through their work or help others understand it better, in this performance it was the public, provoked

into behaving without restraint, that formulated the world of human existence and interpersonal relations.

Speaking of the creative contribution made by the public, Abramović later said that they immediately split into attackers and defenders, depending on their attitude towards her as female object. In other words, her status at the Gallery was interpreted as that of mother, the Virgin Mary or prostitute, depending on each participant’s attitude towards women. At this point language and symbol re-entered the performance, as the behaviour of the participants was to a significant extent determined by language and culture. This was not only because everything that was uttered contributed to the atmosphere, which gradually became more explosive (culminating in a scuffle according to some reports), but because the participants’ behaviour high-

<sup>35</sup> Thomas McEvilly, *Marina Abramović/Ulay-Ulay/Marina Abramović*, Art Forum ,1.XII, New York, 1983, pp. 52-55, cited according to: Ješa Denegri, *Sedamdesete, teme srpske umetnosti*, Svetovi, Novi Sad, 1996, p. 107.

lighted the culture as a system of interpersonal relations in which habits of speech allow or even incite certain forms of conduct, even when nothing is said. The critical dimension of this performance addressed the question of violence, individual and general, laying bare existing patterns of thought and behaviour.

In Abramović's work, critique of the present and present standards has never been in support of universal or general values as "constant but unattainable". Like Michel Foucault's critique of contemporaneity, her performances were a form of research which would be exposed to a contemporary reality check through practical experience. Ontology of ourselves, in Foucault's opinion, cannot be an accumulation of knowledge or theories; it must be an approach, an ethic, life itself, in which the critique of what we are takes place through exploring the limits imposed on us and by transgressing them.<sup>36</sup> Criticism of a form of behaviour or social context in Abramović's work was not arbitrary or explicit, but an artistic intervention which laid bare a potential or latent situation in order for it to be recognized and discussed. Thus, in this performance she promoted the public to an aesthetic or artistic factor by inviting it to participate and do what it wanted to do itself, instead of being a passive presence. This time, it was the artist who was passive.

The inclusion of the audience in the performance of *Rhythm 0* is the absolute embodiment of the premise first understood and made known by Marcel Duchamp that a work of art does not exist without a spectator; that the world of interpretation which is at first external to the work, in fact contributes to constituting its meaning. Duchamp considered that the creative act is not simply the result of the work of the artist, but that the spectator shares in it by bringing the work in contact with the external world by deciphering and interpreting its inner qualifications<sup>37</sup> *Rhythm 0*, however, goes a step further, because here not only the public interprets the artist's work according to its own experience and requirements, thus expanding its meaning, but the main responsibility for expression of certain moods and ideas is handed over to the public. "Before, when I was doing performances and people were coming to watch me, I found their whole approach rather voyeuristic," says Abramovic. "People would come, sit down in a darkened room, feel safe, watch what was going

<sup>36</sup> Michel Foucault: *What is Enlightenment?*, 1978, [www.a.aaaarg.org-archiva](http://www.a.aaaarg.org-archiva)

<sup>37</sup> See: *Marcel Duchamp*, Dawn Ades, Neil Cox, David Hopkins, Thames & Hudson, London, 1999, p. 205.



45. *Rhythm 0*, Studio Morra, Naples, February 1975.

on and then go home. It's possible to watch a performance and not be included; you don't have to feel interest. I wanted my audience to abandon their voyeurist attitude and to be totally included in the work.”<sup>38</sup> Making the viewer an active participant in shaping the performance, including him as an independent actor, however, meant giving up the idea, still dear to artists with an existentialist view of the world, of the artist as a powerful figure. Giving the public equal status in the performance radically changed the idea of the artist as a unique person with sovereign control over all elements of the artistic act, including how it would be perceived. In the changed historical circumstances of the late sixties, insistence on the strong artist of modernism or even on genius was seen as a ploy of the institutions, the market and the critics, whose aim was to build up stars of the art world in order to profit from them commercially, (considered in socialist countries to be confirmation of capitalist ideology). Boris Groys considers

that the most significant and far-reaching change to occur in the art of the seventies was in our understanding of authorship. Of the struggle against the figure of a strong author he rightly says that it is “a struggle against an undemocratic system of arbitrary privileges and unfounded hierarchies” that have throughout history served to represent certain interests.<sup>39</sup>

Still, *Rhythm 0* shows that encouraging the public to take part in a performance by placing it in a position which exposes it and makes it vulnerable was not innocuous for either side. “It was difficult to enjoy a ghoulish frisson of delight in front of these works since the risks Abramović took with her own body placed such a heavy responsibility upon her audience,” was one comment. “These responsibilities had less to

<sup>38</sup> *Marina Abramovic in Conversation*, with Hans-Peter von Däniken and Beatrix Ruf. *New Moment*, no. 7, special edition, Belgrade, June–November 1997, p. 4.

<sup>39</sup> Boris Groys: *Art Power*, MIT Press Books, London, 2008, p. 96.



46. *Rhythm 0*, Studio Morra, Naples, February 1975.

do with saving her from herself than with the larger point – relevant to all performance – that is however committed an artist might be, such commitment is of little value unless it is met with the equal involvement on the viewer's part.”<sup>40</sup>

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<sup>40</sup> Michael Archer, *Art Since 1960*, Thames & Hudson, London, 1997, p. 08.



47. Exhibition of photos and videos from *Rhythms 10, 5, 2, 4, 0*, Salon of the Museum of Contemporary Art, April 1975. Belgrade. Photos of the performance of *Rhythm 10*. (SKC Archives, Belgrade. Photo: Nebojša Čanković)

## Rhythms, or the Mental Pentagram

*Rhythm 0* rounded off a series of five performances by Abramović on exploring physical and mental limits. The artist's behaviour is reduced until it reaches the immobility and passivity of *Rhythm 0*, declaring that she may make use of her own passivity while still producing a high-intensity work of art, because it has been conceived as a means of obtaining a new slant on reality, and because it develops with the personal collaboration of the spectator as participant. Set against the absolute stillness and concentration of *Rhythm 0*, however, was the baroque nature of the slightly later performance of *Thomas Lips*, full of complex mood changes and action, the opposite pole of Abramović's Belgrade opus. These two performances marked the extreme points of the future range of her art.

Here Abramović's early performances operated under two forms: one which might be called ritualistic, suggesting the awakening of elementary forces in man, the relation of human

deeds to the higher powers in order to renew strength and enter another dimension; the second posited a situation in the manner of a scientific experiment designed to examine answers and reactions, querying how things are usually understood, habitual ways of thinking and behaving. The formal structure that bound them together consisted of the original decision or design at the outset of the work, instructions to the viewers, the unpredictability of the performance due to circumstances over which the artist had no control, self-harm, and sometimes behaviour which endangered her life. Another link was the provocation of the spectator who was placed in a real but unanticipated situation and so rendered vulnerable.

The five *Rhythms* which set up an energetic dialogue between artist and public and in which the body was used as a mediator between art and reality, form their own kind of mental pentagram or imaginary microcosm, an imaginary image of man who, like other elements of the universe, is set in motion by the principles of expansion and contraction, emerging and vanishing, alternation, the rhythm of change. Exploring



48. Exhibition of photos and videos from *Rhythms 10, 5, 4, 0*, Salon of the Museum of Contemporary Art, Belgrade, Fourth April Encounters, April 1975. Photos of the performance of *Rhythm 5*. (SKC Archives, Belgrade. Photo: Nebojša Čanković)

the mental and physical limits meant examining the borders of the body of energy, challenging its potential, extending its zone. Whether altering her body chemistry by taking medical drugs or reaching the brink of consciousness and life itself through the action of natural elements or mechanical force, the body was used in these performances in order to push the traditional frontiers of art and opinion. Furthermore, it was to help release the energetic being, so that it began to take on new, hitherto unseen aspects of body and self. *Rhythms* stressed the abandonment of the idea of man caught in a trap of his physical abilities and socially-prompted responses. They supported the development of factors of crucial importance in conquering the transcendental possibilities of freedom, the growth of a sensitivity which would enable the evolution of a "standard of living" independent of material wealth. In this context, the emotions generated by the *Rhythms* should prove effective in producing more developed and meaningful experiences, freeing people from the determinism of material

bonds and mechanical relationships. "Much later, when I encountered other cultures, when I went to Tibet or got to know the Aborigines, or watched Sufi rituals, I realized that these cultures place the body in extreme physical states in order to make a mental leap, to eliminate the fear of death and fear of pain and all the physical limitations in which we live. In Western civilisation, we are so afraid. Performance enabled me to make that mental leap, to pass into another space, another dimension," said the artist on a later occasion.<sup>41</sup>

One senses lurking in the performances of Marina Abramović the ideal man, ready to discover and develop his potential, prepared to confront himself by making a mental leap that will confound the usual perception of reality; there is a confidence in man who, accidentally or by design, can "come out of himself" in order to arrive at self-knowledge and the hidden truths which the familiar and seemingly safe world keeps concealed. This is why the point of the spectator attaining mental and physical bor-

<sup>41</sup> Cited according to: Dobrila De Negri: Marina Abramović, *Pro Femina*, No. 8, Belgrade, Autumn 1996, p. 235.



49. Exhibition of photos and videos from *Rhythms 10, 5, 2, 4, 0*, Salon of the Museum of Contemporary Art. Photos of the performance of *Rhythm 2*, April 1975 (SKC Archives, Belgrade. Photo: Nebojša Čanković)

derline states in the uncomfortable cultural space provided by an art gallery is that it should equip him to live on a higher plane. Because of the unity that reigns among everything that exists, art in which the artist tests her own limits opens up room for the spectator in his turn to achieve transcendence, to seek out the potential that exists in each of us and bring it to full realisation.

The *Rhythms* were very close to the international mood and culture of the early seventies, when the feeling was that if people were to live in better conditions and improve relations they had to break with the linguistics of the existing social set-up; what was needed was a language of art, uncompromised by having been part of the system. Abramović was counted among the exponents of body art such as Joseph Beuys, Gina Pane, Vito Acconci and Bruce Nauman, each of whom was interested in exploring and understanding his or her mental and physical limits. The new artistic practice they represented

believed that in a monopolised society, all communication which validated it had also been monopolised, and that denying the existing world and unveiling a new consciousness required an artistic language which would enable people to see new needs and the birth of new relationships, a language that would permit things to be seen, felt and experienced in a different way.<sup>42</sup>

Internationally, Abramović's appearances in Italy were important, as it was the centre of *Arte Povera*, the Poor Art movement which emerged in the wealthy sixties and rejected prohibitions restricting art to the merely aesthetic in order to maintain its status as preferential goods for barter. Although it had passed its zenith by the mid-seventies, *Arte Povera*'s demands for a more democratic, nomadic art, aimed against

<sup>42</sup> This was a time when some important meta-languages were being discovered or created, such as the genetic code, phonological systems, game theory, the invention of mechanical languages etc. Body art which used the artist's own body to portray concepts, ideas and opinions may also be considered a new language in the domain of the visual arts. In contrast to modernist painting which uses the language of colour, line, gesture and so on to create a separate, autonomous world of the picture, in body art the artistic illusion is replaced by concentration on the artist's body and how it behaves in real surroundings and situations where the reactions and consequences of this behaviour cannot be predicted.



50. and 51. Exhibition of photos and videos from *Rhythms 10, 5, 2, 4, 0*, Salon of the Museum of Contemporary Art. Video of the performance of *Rhythm 4*, April 1975 (SKC Archives, Belgrade. Photo: Nebojša Čanković)

institutions, the market and styles, still played a key role on the international scene, and its activism, heterogeneity, imagination and antidogmatism continued to ensure it the support of many.

After the series of *Rhythms*, whose elements of self-harm and shock placed them squarely among "not only the most radical but in fact the supreme examples of their kind and range of expression on the European artistic scene"<sup>43</sup>, Abramović used the problems she had encountered while performing them to explore some of the basic premises of language and art systems. From this came the pieces *Art Must be Beautiful*, *Artist Must be Beautiful*, *Role Exchange*, *Freeing the Voice*, *Freeing the Memory* and *Freeing the Body*. These seemed to provide the rationale for the underlying artistic concept, arrived at in haste and under great pressure because of the need to change existing patterns in art. Although she would continue in new performances to explore mental and physical limits, the focus was now to be on the role of aesthetics in the new artistic practice, the problem of entrenched institutions, and how to shake free of experience that had been taught, not learned. These performances placed Abramović in the segment of seventies art that wanted to demystify and deconstruct the current artistic system, which it saw as serving the social and political structures it vehemently opposed.

<sup>43</sup> Ješa Denegri, *Sedamdesete: teme srpske umetnosti*, Svetovi, Novi Sad, 1996, p. 158.



52. Exhibition of photos and videos from *Rhythms 10, 5, 2, 4, 0*, Salon of the Museum of Contemporary Art, Belgrade, April 1975. Marina Abramović in front of the photography of performance *Rhythm 0* (SKC Archives, Belgrade. Photo: Nebojša Čanković)

# THE ART DEBATE

"There are innumerable critical points on the way, but a halt or a reversion is impossible, and for the simple reason that every increase of internal vision is essentially the germ of a further vision which includes all the others and carries still farther on."....  
"The more man becomes man, the less will he be prepared to move except towards that which is interminably and indestructibly new. Some 'absolute' is implied in the very play of his operative activity."



53. *Freeing the Memory*, Galerie Ingrid Dacic, Tübingen,  
October 1976.

## The Aesthetic in the New Art of the Seventies

Performances such as Marina Abramović's *Rhythms* did away with the formalist concept of an aesthetic in which skillfully woven harmonies or contrast of shape, colour and line suggest a certain perception of reality or a mood. In the new art, style, composition and expression gave way to concept and process; the disciplines of painting and sculpture were replaced by a huge diffusion of media and operational procedures, which essentially changed ways of regarding and thinking about art. Artistic judgments in any case are neither universal nor timeless but are made in the context of their time. As artists were breaking with representational tradition, aesthetics as a variable value needed to be reassessed. Even at the time of the romantics, beauty had become relative, an historical category, due to the acceptance of the contemporaneity of the art or the ideas expressed as the criterion of beauty, while the historical avant-garde of the 1920s abandoned ideas of art as communication and of the work as the medium whereby the artist sends out his message to the world. The neo avant-garde of the sixties and seventies no longer gave currency to ideas of the work as a finished material object (Lucy Lippard: *The Dematerialisation of the Art Object*), while artists like John Cage, for instance, maintained that the work of the artist begins where beauty ends.

In contrast to *Rhythms* which deconstructed the modernist aesthetic by adopting a new approach to understanding art in terms of the ideology which inspired it, the means used to produce it and its relation to reality, Abramović's *Art Must be Beautiful, Artist must be Beautiful* addressed questions of aesthetic significance and values in the new artistic practice.<sup>44</sup> As this practice - conceptual, *Arte Povera*, Body art, land art - crucially connected art and reality, it was in direct conflict with the Paris school and the post-war high modernism occupying centre stage, particularly with abstract art, whose greatest champion was the critic and art historian Clement Greenberg.

Greenberg considered the flat surface to be the key to the modernist project and championed painting that was limited to flatness and two-dimensionality, which

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<sup>44</sup> The first version took place in Belgrade as part of the *Oktobar '75* [October '75] event and was filmed for Lutz Becker's *Kino beleške I* [Film Notes I]. It was performed again at the Copenhagen International Art Festival in the exhibition space of the Charlottenborg Palace in late 1975. It is this version where the artist appears in the nude using a hairbrush and comb that has become world famous.



54. *Art Must be Beautiful, Artist Must be Beautiful*, Student Cultural Centre, Belgrade, October 1975, duration: 30 min. (Film Notes by Lutz Becker, RTS archive Belgrade)

accentuated the specificity of the medium. He believed that painting based on the two-dimensional reality of the canvas ensured autonomy of art and defined its field of action better than the illusion of depth created by perspective introduced by the Renaissance, which stimulated narrative. Greenberg found philosophical sustenance in Emmanuel Kant's "judgements of taste", according to which the idea of beauty is not connected to objects taken from reality and represented in a picture, but to the viewer, in whom the artwork sets off an endless proliferation of thoughts, reflections and associations. Until Kant, it was thought that beauty was immanent in the object chosen by the artist and represented in his work, that the aesthetic was in some way wholly contained in the object, whose beauty the artist simply transferred to the canvas. For Kant, however, aesthetic experience was exclusively decided by the judgment of taste, a quality which does not exist otherwise than in the form of a judgment, and which implies the ability of the individual to compare and select. Aesthetic judgment

in Kant's opinion is at once personal and universal, in other words it is such that it can refer to the aesthetic features of an object as if they were objective facts. What differentiates Kant's judgment of taste or the aesthetic from logical and empirical judgments is that it does not spring from reason as a cognitive faculty, nor entirely from sense perception, nor is it bound up with the desire to possess or use. According to Kant, moreover, only an object judged disinterestedly may be considered beautiful, and it was only this disinterested judgment on the part of the viewer that he considered to be a judgment of taste, a judgment at once subjective and universal, capable of speaking of the aesthetic characteristics of an object as if they were objective facts.

In the path of Kant, Greenberg found that the value of painting was not decided by the subject or content but by the abstract placing of colours and lines on the flat canvas as a unique and exclusive feature which painting does not share with the other arts and which also separates it from other representational disciplines. He found corroboration for this point of view in the changes that took place from impression-



55. *Art Must be Beautiful, Artist Must be Beautiful*, Student Cultural Centre, Belgrade, October 1975, duration: 30 min. (Film Notes by Lutz Becker, RTS archive Belgrade)

ism to abstract expressionism as painting began increasingly to accentuate the flatness of the pigment-covered canvas, and in the reflections such pictures aroused in the mind of the viewer. Although contemplativeness is demanded to a greater or lesser degree for the appreciation of every kind of art, abstract art tends to present this requirement in its purest, least diluted form, which is why Greenberg considered it the culmination of artistic development.<sup>45</sup>

The new art, however, set itself up in opposition to this idea, conceptually linking art to the quotidian. It deployed personal, human experience against the dogma of the flat surface in abstract painting, abandoning all forms of associativeness in favour of activity which would reach into the deeper layers of being and the more complex aspects of reality. This rejected contemplation, embracing instead the ethical dimension of artistic action undertaken in real time and space. "Art without

ethics is cosmetics," Abramović once said, meaning that art devoted merely to aesthetic values and contemplation was not enough. This explains the criticism of the modernist aesthetic implied in her *Art Must be Beautiful, Artist Must be Beautiful* and its explicit demand to free art from beauty as one of the conventions constituting it.

In this performance, Abramović attacked her hair with both hands using a metal brush and comb, harder and faster, hurting herself, until scratches began to appear on her cheeks and forehead while she constantly repeated: "Art must be beautiful, artist must be beautiful". As the artist was undeniably a beautiful woman, at first glance it might look as if here the aesthetic experience was returning to the beginnings that bound it to the world of real objects, backwards from Greenberg and Kant's understanding of it to Plato and beauty explained by attraction, which in the aesthetic experience has the assumed quality of an object with which we are in contact. For Plato, and indeed for Greeks who were not philosophers, beauty was not intrinsically associated with art, it was that feature of an object or a person which made them desirable and whose objective was to inspire love. The beauty referred to

<sup>45</sup> See: Elizabeth Prettejohn, *Beauty and Art 1750-2000*, Oxford University Press, 2005, p. 184.



56. *Art Must be Beautiful, Artist Must be Beautiful*, Student Cultural Centre, Belgrade, October 1975, duration: 30 min. (Film Notes by Lutz Becker, RTS archive Belgrade)

in Abramović's piece, however, did not relate to something already existing in nature, nor to the representation of nature in art with the help of a certain technique as in, say, portrait art, nor did it convey the idea of feminine beauty which ought to be deconstructed as the product of an out-dated culture. The intention was to confront ideas on beauty with the aesthetic of high modernism then dominating the artistic scene and viewed by artists of the seventies as a futile activity, pandering to the viewer's need for relaxation, pleasure, comfort, sentimentality and snobbery. Art that insisted on surface beauty and pictorialism easily lost sight of reality and became an end in itself, a vacuous entertainment and waste of energy.

*Art Must be Beautiful, Artist Must be Beautiful* in which Abramović brushed her hair compulsively, almost aggressively, also relativised the idea of beauty's value being its power to embellish reality for others, and deconstructed the aesthetic dimension of the artwork as something external and actually unimportant

for reality, which should be represented in its embellished form. The movement of the hands, hair, head and the repetition of the words and gestures highlighted the cliché of beauty keeping art within the bounds of convention. The abrasiveness of the act of embellishment deconstructed and invalidated beauty or the aesthetic, because art, *pace* Abramović, does not have to be beautiful but disturbing, questioning. It must have a vision of its own time and it must take one by surprise. Art must be responsible and serve society, not authority, the state or party, and this would not be feasible if its basic mission was to bring beauty, pleasure and calm, all of which colluded in helping to evade the experience of genuine feeling. Seen in this light, the automatic, feverish, even self-harming gestures with which she brushed her hair, not embellishing anything but becoming an end in themselves, alluded to the altered role of art in contemporary circumstances, and the urgent need for a change in the language through which the new art communicated. In contrast to beauty, which enabled the spectator to escape from reality and contemporaneity into contemplation of the ideal or utopian, radical art did not want to feed illusions of reality but insisted on tension, a tension that would not fade at the end of a piece that revolved



57. *Art Must be Beautiful, Artist Must be Beautiful*, Student Cultural Centre, Belgrade, October 1975, duration: 30 min. (Film Notes by Lutz Becker, RTS archive Belgrade)

around the idea of internal transformation, if society was to renew itself. This is why this kind of performance manifested a utopian trust by the avant-garde in the social power of art, in the profound good sense of engagement, and even in the artist's mission.

Although this piece was not as drastic as *Warm/Cold* or *Thomas Lips*, there was a sharp reaction from the Copenhagen audience and someone tried to interrupt the performance. This incident which damaged the concept of the performance, however, was edited from the video, thus contradicting the idea of using video as a faithful document of the artistic process and direct evidence of reality.<sup>46</sup> Film, and later video, had been used to chronicle and reproduce the artistic process since Jackson Pollock allowed a camera to be placed under the glass on which he was working, and for the first time, the act of painting became as important as the finished work. The use of media as documentation, however, became more important from

the point when the artist's activity no longer resulted in a finished aesthetic object and the crucial element had become the idea, manifested as process or behaviour in "actions" and performances by figures such as Vito Acconci, Chris Burden, Bruce Nauman and others. Since that time, technical media were also used to disseminate works which left no material traces, an expansion of the artist speaking in the first person.

The video of *Art Must be Beautiful, Artist Must be Beautiful*, which omits the incident that interfered with Abramović's idea, seems to show that it was more important to her to preserve the concept of the performance as deconstructing the institutionalised postulates of beauty and the aesthetic than to preserve a true record, not to speak of any interaction between the artist and the public. It was, in fact, Abramović's uncompromising attitude towards the incident which at one moment seemed to threaten

<sup>46</sup> Marina Abramović: *Ne miriti se i ne slagati* [Don't Come to Terms and Don't Agree], in conversation with Radovan Gajić, *Književna reč* [Literary Word], Belgrade, 7 February 1976, interpreted according to: *Nova umetnost u Srbiji 1970-1980, pojedinci, grupe, pojave*, Belgrade, 1983, p.41.

the performance, her definitive refusal to entertain any thought of a return to the previous state of affairs, that confirms the importance of the performance as a work rejecting out-dated ideas of the aesthetic and urging a vital art that would reflect the experiences of real life.



58. Daniel Buren, *French Window*, Galerie des Locataires, Paris 1973.

## Challenging Institutional Strongholds

As early as the 1950s, works such as International Klein Blue, when Yves Klein offered identical pieces at different prices or the empty room of Le Vide, were questioning the rules governing aesthetic matters, relations between the artist, the artwork, institutions and society. Following the social unrest of 1968, however, a number of artists started to produce works critical of the artistic system, particularly the way in which museums and galleries functioned, their basic ideology and exhibiting policies. These works form an independent segment in the new art of the seventies. Daniel Buren pitted himself against art institutions as structures of power by producing only standardized two-coloured stripes, even when this was to order for a particular space or occasion. His idea was to ridicule both the demand to develop a style and the mechanics of the art market. Post-1970, the works of Hans Haacke produced

statistics on visits to galleries, acquisitions, orders and the sale of artworks, while also publishing information on the personal wealth of members of the Guggenheim Museum trust, which gave his engagement the form of a political struggle.

In her performances abroad in the early seventies, Abramović tended to give government and other institutions a wide berth rather than face them head-on. Her work posed a conundrum for the complex procedures then in force in international cultural exchange between socialist and capitalist countries, a cat's cradle of policies with sets of rules based on separate "protocols of cooperation" for each country and each year. Although foreign travel was unrestricted in Yugoslavia during the seventies and all the artist needed for body art performance was his or her own body, neither international exchange programmes nor internal control systems could cope with works of this kind as they had not been officially recognised as art. To succeed in taking them abroad, it was necessary to know how the art system worked both in the socialist system at home and in the countries of the neo-capitalist world. Between



59. *Role Exchange*, De Appel, Amsterdam, summer 1976. S.J. plays the part of Marina Abramović in front of a video replay of *Freeing the Voice*, performed in April that year.

1973 and 1976, Marina Abramović was probably the only Serbian artist who managed to function in both systems, which testifies to the value of her work.

*Role Exchange*, performed in Amsterdam in 1976, however, deals in quite a concrete way with the relationship between art and art institutions. Although the piece evinces her continued interest in human behaviour in extreme situations, she was at least equally focused on demystifying modern art as a discipline and deconstructing its social milieu. To do so, she eliminated the institutional framework of art and challenged the borders of the social system supporting it, whatever the politics of the particular society. In a performance lasting four hours, Abramović exchanged roles with S. J., an Amsterdam prostitute. While S.J. attended the gallery where the opening of an exhibition by Marina Abramović had been announced,

Abramović took S.J.'s place in Amsterdam's red light district. Both of them temporarily abandoned their professional identities and place of work in order to encounter a different public, at the same time accepting responsibility for their actions and for anything that might occur during the four hours of role exchange.

The introduction of a prostitute into the domain of art revives memories of Édouard Manet's *Olympia* (1863), a painting considered to have been the birth of modernism. From then on, pictures of prostitutes became a favoured theme among artists of the Paris School - not unusual, considering that artists and prostitutes moved in similar circles and shared the odium of the public at large, as well as being the objects of its secret desires. Including a prostitute in the new artistic practice served to explore forms of representing women in art and their transformation into aesthetic objects. In *Role Exchange*, however, Abramović went on to question the artistic system as a social and historical construct; the prostitute in the performance did not merely indicate a traditional artistic theme or a sign by which to deconstruct the erotic and demystify modern painting. In contrast to the picture of the prostitute in the art of the Paris School, Abramović discarded the voyeurism of the artist as the secret possessor of the painted nude and, like an anthropologist, literally went out on to the street. For



60. *Role Exchange*, De Appel, Amsterdam, summer 1976. Abramović plays the part of S.J., Red Light District, Amsterdam.

a specified time, she embraced street life, stepped out of the art system into the space inhabited by outcasts in order personally to get to know what was being shown at the gallery, because art that deals with reality should be there where life is lived, life that was to be presented in the gallery in its original form, not through the intermediary of a picture. In addition, to show in a gallery something that existed in an "uninhabited field", or in a field populated by the outcasts of society, reminded us of the arbitrariness of social borderlines and the relativity of categories such as "acceptable" and "not acceptable", or "high" and "low" in art.

When the artist temporarily takes upon herself the life of a prostitute and includes the brothel and the gallery in her work, she throws doubt on the identity of these institutions and tests the value systems of the centre and the margins. As art and prostitution are culture-coded and take place within certain institutions, the performance queries and disputes their power and place in the social hierarchy. The gallery's potential authority is demolished, particularly its domination of the artist who is required to provide certain services, such as creating works that will suit the market (capitalism), or promote certain policies (socialism). The synchronous performance, part of which is in a brothel, reports on an art which has lost its ambition to be socially engaged and is now in the service of entertainment and pleasure. Moreover, as the gallery system is not independent but integrated into the social system, subject like any other segment to various forms of manipulation

especially political and financial, a work of this kind challenges the economic dimension of the artistic system: the question of money, the mechanism of buying and



61. *Role Exchange*, De Appel, Amsterdam, summer 1976. Abramović in the role of S.J., Red Light District, Amsterdam.

selling services, or the rules of a market where artists are not included in deciding the price of their works, nor in a position to reap adequate benefit from them.

Performance that directly takes over a certain experience, presenting the invisible world that exists beyond the borders of socially acceptable behaviour in a prestigious area such as a gallery, however, also has to do with individual identity. In one photograph of the opening, S.J. is seen standing in the gallery in front of a monitor which is playing Abramović's *Freeing the Voice*, performed that year at the April Encounters in Belgrade.<sup>47</sup> Linking the works and completing their significance by showing them in a new context, allowed *Role Exchange* to be interpreted as an act of liberation, as giving a voice to someone or something that was otherwise invisible on the public stage. The performance makes it clear that identity is for the most part a fiction, created where the social meets the individual game, and that it is the locus of an event, the time of action,

work, sexual status, prejudice, speculation and similar factors that decide identity as something extraneous to the person, something that depends on the point of view of another, or is intended for another. Localising various identities in a network of relations and then substituting them (which means a certain degree of similarity or the latter would not be possible) shows how little identity - in principle experienced as something either fixed by birth or formed by history - owes to the individual and how much it depends on the environment in which it is being debated.

*Role Exchange*, also challenges the place and role of the viewer in the artistic system. The performance in the first place reveals that the gallery as institution and part of the social system can exist almost independently of artists and art, that art is possible even in the absence of the artists, but that it is not possible if there is no public. But in contrast to the public which encounters the glance returned to the viewer by the young woman in Édouard Manet's *Odalisque*, and which is interpreted as representing

<sup>47</sup> As the necessary equipment was lacking in Belgrade at the time, the performance was videoed by the Video Heads group from Paris, guests of the Extended Media Festival at the SKC in April 1976.

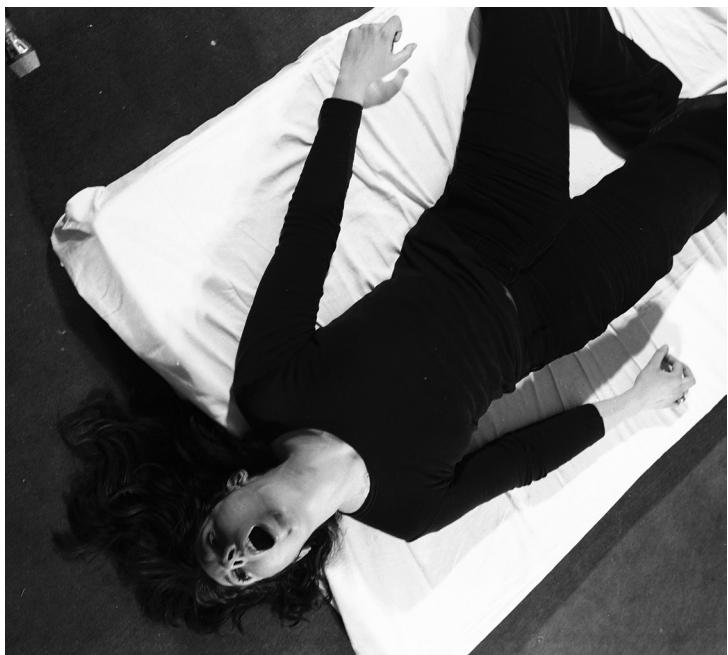
contemporary urban culture in which the potential viewer is also the subject of observation and no longer the only one controlling the view of the world, a live prostitute present in a gallery transformed the scandal of representation into a real event which made visual room for the hidden reality of the artistic system. By bringing a prostitute into the gallery, the viewer was no longer able to enjoy the pictures, because the new art did not want to be passively consumed but to provide a space for a different kind of observation, reflection and participation. In the case of *Role Exchange*, the viewer not only no longer controls the scene by his glance but is himself sucked into the ambivalent system of contemporary art which, unveiled and shorn of social satisfaction, exists as a marginal, barely tolerated activity on the outer edge of acceptability. When the public, accustomed to art that affords a certain pleasurable visual stimulation, a discreet eroticism or the knowledge that a visit to a museum or gallery confers a certain status or at least denotes aspirations to a higher social standing, instead encounters the unacknowledgeable, something it publicly denies and rejects, this is not just a surprise or disappointment but a betrayal of the unwritten contract between artist and spectator. As in the case of Manet's *Odalisque*, this was an aggressive act which erased the symbolic – or in this case real – distance between the world of art and the world of reality, in order for the viewer to recognise the social conventions connected to art, the codes and myths that establish it, and to force us to think about our place in that system.

*Role Exchange* is one of few performances by Abramović which takes place partly outside the artistic space. This mix of art and real life is used, however, as a mode of operation and not as an argument for heteronomy of the artistic field. The deliberate taking over of another's experience and social background for a limited period deconstructs high modernism's ideal of artistic autonomy according to which art is a prestigious activity which takes place in the benign space of the studio, but not in order for art to create an effect in some other field. It is that mental structures are used in the performance, which have already incorporated structures from the real world for the defence of values such as the ethical purity and competency of art, of which Pierre Bourdieu writes in a somewhat different context. He considers it acceptable to move art out of the artistic field in cases where this serves to preserve art's moral authority as the sacred production of culture. Or, as he puts it in Marxist terms, when it is done in order to defend "the ownership by cultural producers of their instruments of pro-

duction and circulation, and hence of evaluation and consecration".<sup>48</sup> Questions of ethics and competency have always been important to art. For a performance such as *Role Exchange* they were crucial, as the work addresses the identity of art in a situation where it ceases to be the production of aesthetic objects and endeavours to become a new construction of the science of man, the new anthropology.

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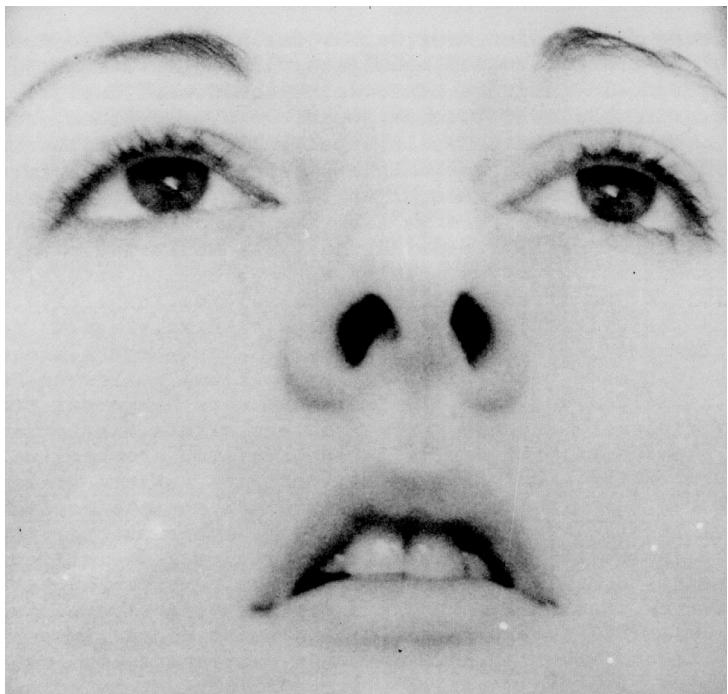
<sup>48</sup> Pierre Bourdieu, *The Rules of Art: Genesis and Structure of the Literary Field* (tr.), Svetovi, Novi Sad, 2004, p. 465-476.



62. and 63. *Freeing the Voice*, Student Cultural Centre, Belgrade, April 1976, duration: 3 hours. (SKC Archives, Belgrade. Photo: Nebojša Čanković)

## Freeing the Artistic Space

Behind Abramović's readiness to carry an idea, achievement, possibility or plan to its end or to the last frontiers of endurance of her own body, was the urge to discover the ultimate sense of a situation, to reveal the structures of reality which, if one went far enough, would reveal themselves like the seams of a glove turned inside out. This consistency derives from the historical avant-garde of the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, whose protagonists also abolished the rules of the current symbolic language and the world as it appeared to be, in order to arrive at a deeper and – they considered – more objective and enduring understanding of it. For the Belgrade group of six – and the art of Marina Abramović – of special importance were the works of Piet Mondrian who, beginning with elements from nature, went so far into deconstructing them that his pictures were reduced to an abstract grid. At the focus of Mondrian's concept of Neo-Plasticism, was the thorough exploration of the reality underlying things in their manifest forms, the desire "to escape from the internal necessities of our individual existence and to create a pure art, free of human tragedy, impersonal and universal." "We now learn to translate reality in our imagination into constructions which can be controlled by reason in order to recover these same constructions later, 'given' natural reality, thus penetrating nature by means of plastic vision," Mondrian said. Sensitivity and sentimentality are rejected and there is insistence on objectivity, even on an anti-individualist and therefore anti-expressionist concept of art. "I abhor everything approaching temperamental inspiration, 'sacred fire' and all those attributes of genius which serve only as cloaks for untidy minds," he is quoted as saying. As a humanist, he believed that the new, constructive art, of which he was the precursor, would create a rich, deeply human but



64. *Freeing the Memory*, Galerie Dacic, Tübingen, October 1976, duration: 90 min.

completely new kind of beauty. Philosophically, he inclined to M.H.J. Schoenmaekers and his conviction that "However persistent, however capricious it may be in its variations, nature always functions fundamentally with absolute regularity", and that it was the job of art – and science in general – to penetrate it in such a way "as to reveal to us the inner construction of reality."<sup>49</sup> Although with Abramović, nature and new forms of spirituality were investigated by relying on the artist's body and how it behaved, a paradigm which favoured the idea over the finished work and universal reality over the manifest appearance of things was of special importance in this early formative period of her work.

Taking a possibility to its very end, getting to the final consequences of an artistic point of view are the ideas underlying the performances *Freeing the Voice*, *Freeing the Memory* and *Freeing the Body*, which focus on the body as the instrument of body art, the language by which it tests the sensitive borders of spiri-

tual, material and mental experience. The three performances passed through processes of liberation and purification, a decontamination of experience designed to precede a thorough-going reform of art and life. Through processes of discharging the instilled ideas that form one's knowledge, impressions, memories and opinion of oneself and written into the movement of thought, nerves, tissue and muscle, these performances appeared to be preparing or adapting the physical, mental, intellectual and psychological capabilities of the body/consciousness for an art that would act without the agency of the artwork as object, by a direct exchange of energy between artist and user. The key premise for such art was a fully open state of mind coupled with lucid observation, a state in which the subject would achieve the kind of closeness with herself that would make her an adept. "Freeing her body of the cultural deposits of the symbolic, deconstructing the authority of language, behaviour, knowledge, discharging her body, Marina Abramović aspires to a state of mentally

<sup>49</sup> Herbert Read, *A Concise History of Modern Painting, from Cezanne to Picasso* (tr.), Yugoslavia, Belgrade, 1979, p. 196-201.



65. *Freeing the Body*, Künstlerhaus Bethanien, Berlin, 1976, duration: 8 hours.

'purified,' pre-rational existence,"<sup>50</sup> said Dobrila De Negri of these pieces. In fact, this was the intention of all her works, but in *Freeing the Voice*, *Freeing the Memory* and *Freeing the Body* performed in 1976 in Belgrade, Tübingen and Berlin, they are most explicit. By exhausting the voice as the vehicle of verbal communication, discharging pent-up memories or through the release of energy, there was liberation from a system of thinking and behaving in art, because that art was no longer fit to represent things in nature or society. Instead, it would be established as a discipline that dealt with man, his existence and chances for change.

*Freeing the Voice* was performed in the Gallery of the SKC in Belgrade. Dressed in black, Abramović lay on a white sheet on the ground and "freed" her voice from its lowest to its loudest range so that it rang in full force round the gallery. This went on until she became exhausted.<sup>51</sup> The vibration of the vocal cords and the sound they produced, the spasm while expelling air, the exhausting effort of repeating the scream which

shook her whole body, ultimately ending in voicelessness as the uttermost limit, reinforced the physical aspect, reminding listeners that the voice is of the body. But as it is a vehicle whereby the body extends in space, bridging the distance between its own interior and the environment, *Freeing the Voice* challenged the border between the physical and the symbolic. Freeing the voice, the least unit of the linguistic/language structure representing the basic matter of language or its previous state, and its transformation into an excruciating shriek, was like transgressing the speaking subject. It recalled the power of rudimentary communication reduced to the voice, in whose intensity the strength of the entire body and the experience of living in it was compressed.

<sup>50</sup> Dobrila De Negri, *Marina Abramović*, Pro Femina, no. 8, Belgrade, Autumn 1996, p. 236.

<sup>51</sup> The performance recalls an Abramović drawing in the first issue of *Signal* magazine, which depicts the small letter 'a' surrounded by an op-art echo. In another picture the photo of a metronome takes the place of the capital 'A', which it resembles in form, while simultaneously evoking the temporal dimension of the sound 'AH', later to be heard in the joint Abramović-Ulay performance AAA-AAA in March 1978 in Amsterdam.



66. *Freeing the Body*, Künstlerhaus Bethanien, Berlin, 1976.

In contrast to *Freeing the Voice* which excludes words or speech, *Freeing the Memory* restores them, but in a specific way. In this performance, the artist speaks words which come to mind at the moment she utters them: the names of people and towns, objects, ideas. As they have no grammar, no symbolic links, here the memory is structured like a living vocabulary. Still, the omission of linguistic connections such as that segment of speech that is saturated by personal and social psychology and history, shows that memory was not crucial to this performance, which really had to do with freeing the subject from symbolic links with the past and deconstructing the experience of structured recollection. Through its peculiar vocabulary, knowledge of the world is taken outside and returned to the world from whence it came, a "ravelled" knowledge, i.e. divested of the relations between words which would establish it, as a particular experience, or the experience of a particular person. Such freeing of the memory is a guarantee of mental flux, and the performance which produced it referred, like *Freeing the Voice*, to overcoming existing relations, fixed by habits of language and communication.

Freeing oneself of connections that through memory and recollection tie one to the past and a particular understanding of history, whether personal or social, reminds us that a similar liberation needs to take place in the broader, social sense. Critical art at the end of the sixties and early seventies strove to provide the necessary corrective in the life of the community, insisting that the past must be reconfigured if the present were to be given new sense. From a basic model that suits the current cultural set-up and the goals of the society, patterns of culture are formed over time. Supported and promoted by custom and institutions, selection and inclusion, from time to time they become extreme, arriving at a point where revision takes place automatically and violently, through revolution or collapse.<sup>52</sup> Art that by exhausting individual memory discards this exclusive cultural model is one way of weighing up prevailing cultural patterns and subjecting them to critical examination. Exhausting

<sup>52</sup> See: Ruth Benedict, *Patterns of Culture* (tr.), Prosveta, Belgrade, 1976, p. 266.

one's memory means to free oneself as an individual of the social body, thus clearing at least a tiny piece of the common mental space which is also established by language as a system of conventions. This might, at least in principle, make way for a different collective memory as a basic premise for a culture more suited to the needs of modern man.

*Freeing the Memory* was shot with a static camera and shows only the artist's face in close-up. The static frame, although at first glance seeming to advocate an authoritative point of view, in fact serves to keep the viewer's attention from wandering. This video document concentrated on the tiniest flicker of the eyes, the slightest change of expression, the words which flow or hesitate until at last they dry up completely, seems to reveal the artist's brain at work, making visible the mental effort needed for a conceptual piece, just as it would the hand of a painter. Besides the scene on the monitor which was happening in real time and was a live portrait of the artist "from within" as it were, the piece also existed in the form of preparatory notes for the performance, or as remembrances of it – in any case as part of the documentation.

In addition to memory structured as the language which we speak, there is also "molecular memory" or tissue memory, which is like the memory of what living in the world has done to the body, and which exists not merely in single-cell and some multi-cell organisms but also in man. The third work in the trilogy was *Freeing the Body*, in which Abramović, nude, her face covered with a black scarf, danced frenziedly to a bongo beat around an area of the gallery before collapsing after eight hours. It was as if she was addressing that memory which is not a matter of conscious recollection and remembered experience. Her movement consisted mainly of bobbing up and down on the spot to the point of exhaustion in time to a rhythm coming from elsewhere, from another equally anonymous person. It was not directed at any object; it did not transgress any space or change any perspectives. Like the using up of voice and words, this simple expenditure of time and energy was dedicated to liberation, this time from formulae, stimuli or judgements made at physiological level. Since the only change the performance brought was exhaustion, cessation of movement and eventual collapse, it is signified by two phenomena or forms of energy: the objectives of movement and stillness. But if this concept implies something else, it would be that it urges the modulation of experience and the changing of one's exis-

tence - frequently as pointless a waste of energy as Marina's dancing seemed to be. In that case, *Freeing the Body*, which like the two previous performances took place only in real time, refers to the time of socialising the subject and to the layers of experience which need to be drained away in order to set the accounts straight and start all over again.

**LEAVING**



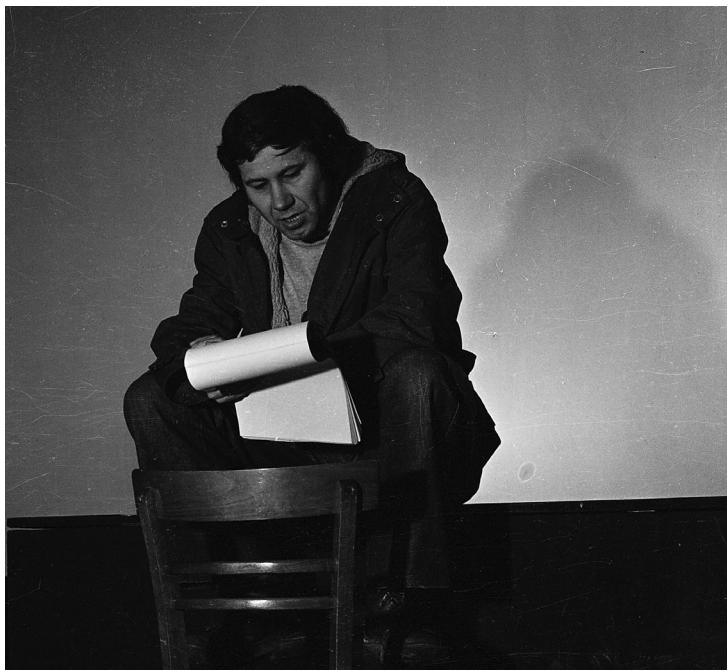
67. *Relation in Space*, 38<sup>th</sup> Venice Biennale, June 1976.

"Any contemplation of the function of art in the modern world must proceed from the assumption that the phenomenon of art is not an isolated, immutable and neutral sphere of the spirit, but on the contrary an integral part of the broadest socio-economic reality, which not only affects the organisation of artistic life in the present social context, but also sets the essential character of the language through which artistic standpoints are formed and expressed," Ješa Denegri wrote at the time of the *October '75* event in the Gallery of the Belgrade Student Cultural Centre. This was the last event in which artists and their associates who had been working with the Gallery from the beginning took part. At the insistence of the organisers, it consisted of their artistic opinions articulated in writing. "The language of art rooted in immanent historical patterns and in the irreplaceable experiences of individual artists is one thing," Denegri went on, "While the system of art, founded on general determinants dependent not only on consciousness and the imagination but the position and status of those artists in a certain societal context, is another. ... To pursue this argument, we might then declare that the form and position of art in these systems is seen in the possibility of its reacting to the dominant factors of social power, whether such power manifests itself as economic, ideological or the political structure of government. The physiognomy of contemporary art at this point in history, then, is nothing other than a form of resistance formulated in a specific language, or a form of integration with the notion and instruments of government".<sup>53</sup> Concepts such as "the structure of government" and "resistance", here expressed by the creation of a specific language, should not be understood only in their political sense but as stating the need to re-examine and deconstruct the social and cultural hierarchy which, besides the institutions of state, also covered institutions such as the family, art academies and traditions which assumed the right to arrange each and every aspect of people's lives and feelings.

Abramović's performances, too, which demanded the creation of an empty field and a new beginning, showed an awareness of the need for a linguistic break not only with the current artistic scene, art history and public taste, but with the culture,

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<sup>53</sup> Ješa Denegri, *Jezik umetnosti i sistem umetnosti* [The Language of Art and the System of Art], published in: *Publikacija Oktobar '75* [Oktobar '75 Publications], Gallery of the Student Cultural Centre, Belgrade, October 1975, cited according to: *Razlozi za drugu liniju, Za novu umetnost sedamdesetih* [Reasons for Another Line, For the New Art of the Seventies], Novi Sad, 2007, p. 500.



68. Jea Denegri at the shooting of Lutz Becker's *Film Notes, October '75* event, Student Cultural Centre, Belgrade, October 1975. (SKC Archives, Belgrade. Photo: Boris Koršić)

even the shedding of one's own social background. Marina Abramović came from a family which owed its status to the events of World War II and "the struggle for national liberation", tantamount to a social revolution. In contrast to similar families in Yugoslavia of the sixties, where the fathers' duties frequently meant their absence from home and family life while mothers stayed at home or worked as teachers or in clerical employment, shortly after the war Marina's mother began to occupy exalted positions. About the time that her daughter was enrolling at the Academy of Art in 1965, the parents divorced, and Danica Rosić Abramović, with whom the children continued to live, became director of the Museum of the Revolution. This was an institution whose mandate was to preserve and study the revolutionary heritage and ensure its usefulness in producing a certain type of behaviour. It was in the nature of the work that its director should collaborate with similar museums in the republics and provinces, with the Military Museum and the Institute for Modern History. Taking part in decision-making, cooperating with other cultural institutions and sitting on various panels, she was keyed into supporting and promoting a type of artistic expression founded on the principles of academic modernism, revived and supported by the authority of the state institutions. Abramović's situation at home only augmented the pressure exercised by the Academy, where a generation of professors taught art as a trade or technique whose legitimacy accrued from the professor's name and his role as guardian of the existing social order.<sup>54</sup>

<sup>54</sup> The gap between the generation that had survived the great depression and World War II and the post-war generation was greater than it had ever been historically. Young people lived in relative comfort, torn from the past of a community now transformed by revolution. They had no way of understanding what their parents had gone through, just as the parents had difficulty in accepting the changed world that gave their children inspiration. The divide was deepened by irreducible differences between the parents' upbringing in a rural or working class environment and a highly urbanised youth, especially those from better-off homes who could travel abroad at will. "However strong their family ties, however powerful the web of tradition that enmeshed them, there could not but be a vast gap between their understanding of life, their experiences and expectations, and those of older generations." (Eric Hobsbawm, "The Age of Extremes" (tr.), Dereta, Belgrade, 2004, pp 250, 251).



69. Marina Abramović in a performance by Hermann Nitsch, Schloss Prinzendorf, Austria, 1975.

Social and family pressure, or pressure of the combined authority of family, Academy and artistic system, only reinforced Abramović's critical attitude and contributed to the compulsiveness of her works that centred around freedom, purification, discharge and transcendence. The project for one performance proposed in 1970, for the Gallery of the Youth Centre indicates that this clash was stronger and deeper than a mere generation gap. The proposal renders a dramatic account of a reality that exacts obedience to pointless rules that obliterate the person and stunt his development. It also evinces an urgent desire to transcend the present situation, whatever the cost. "I stand in front of the public dressed in my regular clothes," the synopsis runs. "At the side of the stage is a clothes-rack on which I hang the clothes which my mother wanted me to wear. Slowly, I take the clothes one by one and I change into them. I stand facing the public for a while. From the right pocket of my skirt I take a gun. From the left pocket of my skirt I take a bullet. I put the bullet into the chamber and turn it. I place the gun to my temple. I pull the trigger. This performance has two possible endings." She was then twenty-four.

Young artists did not accept the identity forced upon them, nor did they wish to be part of a system of art they considered inadequate for understanding and reshaping the world - superfluous in fact, as they saw in it just another manipulative discipline. In their opinion, it was not only the artistic pursuits

they supported that had been blocked out of this system, but also individual needs and feelings. To the revolution carried out in the name of social emancipation on behalf of a collectivity that had to maintain complete control in order to survive, they opposed a revolution that demanded individual freedom, the modern right to love and live in one's own unique way. In Abramović's case, the pressure was greater because in addition to the clash of generations, there was the clash of two avant-gardes: political and artistic. Common to both, which helped bring them closer together, was perhaps not so much a belief in the possibility of radical transformation



70. Danica Rosić Abramović at the Museum of the Revolution.

of the system or one's own place and role in it, but a feeling of inevitability, urgency forcing the individual to act, combined with a readiness to risk all or nothing and stick doggedly to one's guns.

These were the two different, even opposing cultural and ideological models of which Filiberto Menna speaks in his book *Profezia di una società estetica* (Prophecy of an Aesthetic Society) which examines the historical and artistic nexuses of 1968. One model relied on the Enlightenment and believed in politics as the only force capable of changing society. With the Enlightenment, art was no longer so occupied with discovering the realities of nature as with taking upon itself the task of contributing to the development of society and the individual.

The objective of such art was the laborious building of a new society founded on work and personal sacrifice. As this art from William Hogarth to George Grosz or from Gustave Courbet to Bertolt Brecht represented a certain class and world view, it did not demand autonomy of action but put itself at the service of politics, or at least tried to contribute to the making of an honest and upright society. The artist was still organically connected to the class that had made him, and acted as the exponent and defender of the more progressive ideas of that class.

The other model, embraced by the artistic avant-garde, looked back to German romanticism and the separation of art from politics. The social function of artists and intellectuals in general was to influence reality by their own artistic, philosophical and aesthetic means, not by policies developed by others. This did not mean explicitly avoiding politics, but a firm belief in transferring its function to artistic pedagogy instead. Contrary to politics in which they saw a source of division and animosity which separated individual life from the life of society, art was seen as an essential alternative to existing reality, a force that would reveal the character of the current conflict and point out ways to transcend it. This model meant analysing one's own social objectives. It also meant fulfilling one's mission as that of a defender appointed to protect the interests of all of society, not just of one's own class. It's unabashed



71. Marina Abramović walking with her father in Kalemegdan, Belgrade.

intention was to impose itself as the interpreter of pure human values and to take up a position that would be independent of current political forces.<sup>55</sup>

In Marina Abramović's case, the clash of these two cultural models so deeply felt between two generations, each with its different history and radically different ideas on prospects and objectives, was equally dramatic for both sides. Her artistic engagement was causing serious problems for the family, who were bluntly criticised at party meetings. This goes to show that the enmeshment of the political authorities in art was not just official or institutional, pressure was also brought to bear on the artist's surroundings, on the patriarchal principle that the family as the extended arm of the political system was duty bound to discipline its members in keeping with the current ideological model (once the task of the marketplace or the town), and not infrequently with certain other interests as well. It seems, furthermore, that in order to survive and avoid change, the system preferred to have recourse to measures of "internal control", working through the family or profession rather than resorting to repression, which would compromise its power.

It is probably this that gave Abramović's more dramatic performances on the mental and physical brink their narrative of revolution as a struggle for bare survival, their descriptions of

living in extreme conditions, but also their avant-garde belief that heroic acts can conquer circumstances, their self-confidence, which in the higher reaches of society is somehow always firmer and more sure of itself, enabling the individual to survive independently and go on, no matter what. Keeping the very different trajectories of politics and the artistic avant-garde in her sights, Abramović was always suspicious of artists with political ambitions. Art and politics in her opinion had to use different

<sup>55</sup> Filiberto Menna, *Prophecy of an Aesthetic Society* (tr.), Radionica SIC [Workshop of the Students' Publishing Centre], Belgrade, 1984, p. 34-40, 83.

means of communicating with the community. Their methods of social action could not mix. "As an artist you can work only with what is in you. That seems contradictory, but it's true: the deeper you go into yourself, you arrive at universal perceptions. Because only if you take yourself seriously can the things that affect everyone come to the surface," she said later. Or: "Even when the situation is most acute, artists must react differently to it than journalists, they should provide a solution, a statement, develop a vision for the future, above all through their work as artists."<sup>56</sup>

Rigorous work on the self formed the basis of Abramović's work during her Belgrade period between 1971 and 1976. It outlined a concept of art that trusts man the individual, his ability to use his own judgment and make decisions that will lead to a better quality of existence and thus indirectly to social renewal. Like anthropology, such art would liberate the individual and reveal the mechanisms of the culture he has created, his beliefs, institutions, or the mastery of one man over another. This is not the utopian aesthetic society founded on games, imagination and the irrational such as Herbert Marcuse advocated, but one that would lead to change in the perception of reality by introducing alternative models of observation and reflection, a storehouse of ideas and mechanisms through which various values and aptitudes could be noted and included in social life. As art cannot do much to change the world order, its contribution might be to foster individual skills of observation and judgement and to change existing cultural patterns at individual level. To be culturally aware means to be capable of judging the salient features of one's own civilisation, even if they happen to be those most dear to that particular culture and frequently appear indispensable to its members, writes the anthropologist Ruth Benedict. "The recognition of cultural relativity carries with it its own values, which need not be the values of the absolutist philosophies. It challenges customary opinions and causes those who have been bred to them acute discomfort. It rouses pessimism because it throws old formulas into confusion, not because it contains anything intrinsically difficult. As soon as the new opinion is embraced as customary belief, it will be another trusted bulwark of the good life. We shall arrive then at a more realistic social

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<sup>56</sup> *Marina Abramović in Conversation*, with Hans-Peter von Däniken and Beatrix Ruf, *New Moment*, no. 7, special edition, Belgrade, June–November 1997, p. 4.



72. *Relation in Space*, 38th Venice Biennale, June 1976.

the neo-Marxist Art and Language Group and their views on left-wing artistic action was an added incentive.

Abramović did not fill in the questionnaire. Her engagement was exclusively in artistic practice, with her carefully planned provocations of the main proponents of language and the artistic system, whether at home or abroad. She performed the first version of *Art Must be Beautiful, Artist Must be Beautiful* for Oktobar '75. It is central to the representation of her work in Lutz Becker's film *Kino beleške* / [Film Notes I] about the SKC

faith, accepting as grounds for hope and as new bases for tolerance the coexisting and equally valid patterns of life which mankind has created for itself from the raw materials of existence."<sup>57</sup>

When, as part of *Oktobar '75*, the artists and associates of the SKC Gallery were asked to put their artistic opinions in writing in a questionnaire, the dissatisfaction simmering in some of them came to the surface: their art brought them neither social nor material satisfaction, they could not live from their work and their role in the artistic system remained marginal. Their criticism of society, so far manifest in choice of artistic language, swelled with some into a demand for the open politicisation of artistic practice, a struggle against bureaucracy and "petty-bourgeois" or "reactionary" thinking. Artists who saw themselves as authentic representatives of the left and continuers of the revolutionary tradition called on the *Communist Manifesto* and other Marxist literature, frequently expressing themselves in the political lingo of the time, studded with references to "the forces of production" and "production relations". They had unwavering confidence in the non-ownership mechanisms of the Yugoslav system of Socialist Self-Management, which only had to be applied to connect art with the "social base", as the expression went. The arrival in Belgrade just before the opening of *Oktobar '75* of the radical wing of the New York branch of

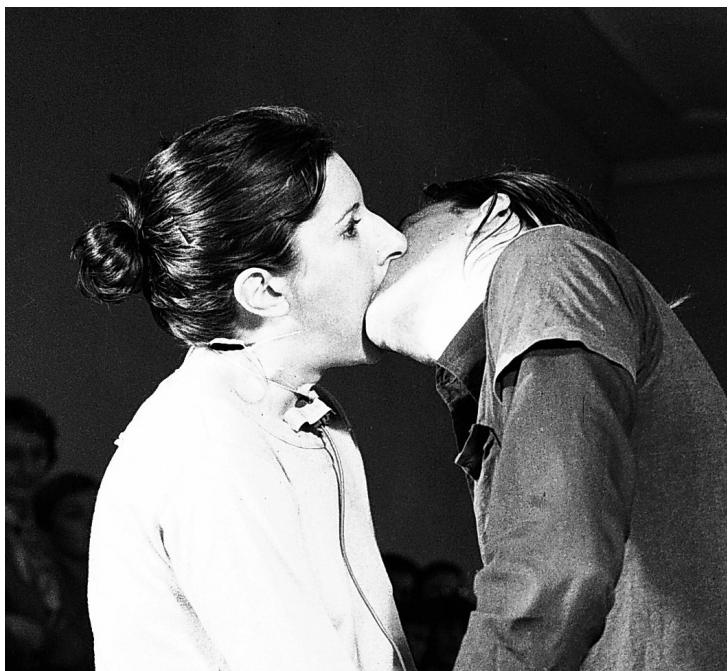
<sup>57</sup> Ruth Benedict, *Patterns of Culture* (tr.), Prosveta, Belgrade, 1976, pp 266, 267 and 294.



73. Marina Abramović and Ulay, *Breathing In/Breathing Out*, Student Cultural Centre, Belgrade, 23 April 1977, duration: 19 mins. Achille Bonito Oliva in the audience. (SKC Archives, Belgrade. Photo: Nebojša Čanković)

Gallery and its artists. The opening shots show Abramović sitting in an office, typing out a summary of what she is about to do. This is followed by the performance, and ends with a long shot taken from a car on a cold, damp day as it moves away from SKC towards the grey outskirts of the city. We hear her voice reading out a radio schedule over shots of the city, the names and times of the programmes indicating the passing day. These markers of time and space, illustrating her life at that time, also mark the performance, which challenges beauty and the aesthetic so that art may reveal more profound levels of reality and a more varied experience. The performance is simple but intriguing: Marina Abramović, dressed all in black, draws a comb through her hair, at times ferociously, at others flirtatiously. Comparing the Belgrade version with the Copenhagen one, it is clear that in the intervening two months she cleaned up and pared down her act in the interests of clarity and precision.

Although she refers to the vacuousness of art separated from real experience, *Art Must be Beautiful, Artist Must be Beautiful* nonetheless takes place in an autonomous space. If the aim of an artistic activity is to deconstruct the mechanisms of power, if only in terms of deconstructing the power to impose certain ideas about art, it cannot make use of the same discourse used to establish that power and give it legitimacy, or the argument will be reduced to a struggle for prestige within the existing system. A critique which calls on the discourse of power does not even symbolically endanger the system but merely entrenches it, in contrast to precisely executed action aimed at a scrupulous examination that will lay bare the workings of power in places where they are least expected. As Abramović had exited the political turf and excluded its cant from her work, she was culturally more radical than the other SKC artists. One consequence of this, still evident today, is a tendency on the part of some of the professional public to minimise her role in the group of individualists with whom she collaborated, and even exclude her Belgrade period from the history of modern art in Serbia.



74. *Breathing In/Breathing Out*, Student Cultural Centre, Belgrade, April 1977. (SKC Archives, Belgrade.  
Photo: Nebojša Čanković)

Shortly after Oktobar '75, the group of six withdrew from the Gallery of the Student Cultural Centre, except for Neša Paripović who continued to work there from time to time. A new generation gathered around it, no longer hailing from artistic backgrounds or kindred professions but who had studied electronics, mathematics and similar disciplines. Formed in March 1976, Group 143 was based on principles quite opposite to those of the generation preceding it. In contrast to the internationalist, provocative practice of the group of six with their on-going exhibitions and polemics, this was discreet, introvert, studious work, almost invisible, intent on making an unambiguous, verifiable artistic statement. Members of Group 143, understandably, also worked on self-education, but did not arrange exhibitions of their work or performances, were not open to the public and left behind only minimal traces of their activity. It was in the nature of things that their behaviour and somewhat literal interpretation of the heteronomy of the artistic field, the death of the author and the authenticity (or

otherwise) of the artistic act, put an end to all arguments over modernist ideology, the artistic and educational systems. This passivity, following so quickly on the heels of the controversy and radical politics of *Oktobar '75*, must nonetheless have come as a relief to those in the SKC administration or public culture who had always objected to the noisy antics of the informal group of six.

Although Abramović was present in Belgrade in 1976 at the April Encounters and later, her last three performances: *Freeing the Voice*, *Freeing the Memory* and *Freeing the Body* were a gradual preparation for her final departure from the country. On their shared birthday, 30 November 1975, Abramović had met the German artist Frank Uwe Laysiepen – Ulay, with whom she would begin to live and work by the middle of the following year. Born in 1943 in Nazi Germany, Ulay's birth certificate bore a small swastika, while Abramović, born in communist Serbia, had a five-pointed star on hers. Their life together was to provide them both with new chances of exploring their mental and physical limits, as could be seen from their very first joint performance *Relation in Space* at the Venice Biennale 1976. This was conceived as the repeated collision of their naked bodies as they ran at each other again and again within a room, sometimes

with such force as to make Abramović stumble. This continued until after about an hour a maximum was reached. This did not mean the end of the performance, however, which was videoed by a fixed camera as a work dealing with the philosophy of behaviour and the principle of male/female relations. Abramović and Ulay were later to take part at the 6<sup>th</sup> and last April Encounters in 1977, when they performed Breathing In/Breathing Out on video. This involved breathing the air in turn from one another's lungs. In those days, they looked rather alike: tall, well-built with long hair tied back. Kneeling opposite each other, mouths clamped together and their nostrils blocked, they formed a single, hermaphrodite body. Still, the performance seems to undermine the myth of the power of such a body, as the piece could only last until one of them gave up or suffocated from inhaling carbon dioxide, the only air to circulate between them during the performance.

Abramović and Ulay soon opted for a life of travel, of permanent movement without any fixed framework or predictable, linear sequence of events, a life that would constantly bring a change of perspective along with the risk of fatal errors and undesirable consequences. "No fixed living place. Permanent movement. Direct contact. Local relation. Self-selection. Passing limitations. Taking risks. Mobile energy" were the mottoes of the art they lived out together until the first big change in 1980. They defined it as Art Vital/Detour, or Relation Work – Detour, Relation Work standing for their performances and Detour for the travelling. They lived in a van from what they could pick up along the way, and their art was the art of living without any comfort, security or material prosperity. This meant continually encountering new and unfamiliar situations, knowingly choosing chance over predictability, being open to other ways of thinking on the multiform contradictions of life and of themselves – vital for artists exploring their mental and physical limits. Since travel as life and as art meant giving up the idea of establishing or holding on to anything, apart from what might be found by random experience at the moment of experiencing it, it also meant completely cutting their ties with the past and the future, a complete deracination. Underlying this choice of lifestyle was the aspiration of both artists to self-knowledge, concentration and inner maturity as the guiding principles of their artistic generation, which still believed in self-perfection and progress, both personally as individuals and as members of society.

## Marina Abramović, a Brief Biography

Born in 1946 into a military family in Belgrade, Serbia, Marina Abramović attended the Belgrade Academy of Fine Arts from 1965-1970, pursuing her postgraduate studies in Zagreb from 1970-1972. Between 1971 and 1973, she was part of an informal group of six artists whose work centred around the Gallery of the Belgrade Student Cultural Centre, exhibiting objects, projects, photographs and sound pieces. From 1973 to 1974 she taught at the Teacher Training College in Novi Sad. Between 1973 and her departure from the country in 1976, she produced works of video and performance art in which she made use of potentially dangerous situations and objects in order to explore the borders of physical and mental endurance. In mid-1976, she began to live and work with the German artist Ulay. Opting for a life of art and travel with no fixed address, they toured central Australia, the Sahara, the Thar and Gobi Deserts. In 1983 she worked as a guest professor at the Paris Académie des Beaux-Arts. Between 1985 and 1987 she travelled with Ulay three times to China in order to prepare for *The Lovers – the Great Wall Walk*. Following a 90-day walk along the Great Wall, the pair separated in 1988, after which their collaboration ceased. In 1990-91, she was guest professor at the Berlin Hochschule der Künste. Between 1992 and 1996, she taught at the Hochschule für Bildende Künste, Hamburg, and in 1997 at the Hochschule für Bildende Künste in Braunschweig. She was awarded the Golden Lion for best artist by the 1997 *Venice Biennale*. In 1998 she became a member of the board of the Contemporary Art Centre, Kitakyushu, Japan. She moved to the USA in 2000 where she has received numerous awards for her performances: *The House with the Ocean View* at the Sean Kelly Gallery, New York in 2002, *Seven Easy Pieces* at the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum in 2005 and for a retrospective exhibition including a performance of *The Artist is Present* at the New York Museum of Modern Art (MoMA) in 2010.



75. *Freeing the Voice*, Student Cultural Centre, Belgrade, April 1976, duration: 3 hours. (SKC Archives, Belgrade. Photo: Nebojša Čanković)

## Belgrade period: 1970 -1976

**1970.** Graduates from the Belgrade Academy of Fine Arts in the class of Stojan Ćelić. Lives at no. 32 Makedonska Street. Weds Neša Paripović to whom she remains married until 1976. In November, holds her first solo exhibition at the Gallery of the Belgrade Youth Centre - large format pictures: *Projekcija oblaka* (Cloud Projections), *Nevizvesnost* (Uncertainty), *Strah* (Fear), *Leteća soba* (Flying room) etc., described by the critics as a fusion of surrealism and decorative art. Publishes *A* and *Dim* (Smoke) in Miroljub Todorović's avant-garde magazine *Signal*, where she works as an editor. From 1970 to the end of the 1972 academic year, she attends Krsto Hegedušić's Master Workshop in Zagreb.

**1971.** From April 1971 to August 1973, i.e. from the opening of the Gallery of the Belgrade Student Cultural Centre to her performance at the Edinburgh Art Festival, she works and exhibits with a group of six artists that includes Neša Paripović, Raša Todosijević, Era Milivojević, Zoran Popović and Gergelj Urkom. In the Gallery of the Belgrade Student Cultural Centre, she exhibits photographs, sound pieces and other installations which examine the relations between nature, art and culture and in neo-dadist fashion, challenge landscape art, particularly the "native heath" model as its prevailing paradigm. Represented at the Poesia Signalista Jugoslava, Milan, in a Signalist anthology published in Novi Sad the same year.

**1972.** In January she shows four drawings and three sound pieces at the Young Artists, Young Critics exhibition at the Museum of Contemporary Art, Belgrade. The sound pieces are: *Forest*, *Footsteps* and *Sound Corridor War* in which the observer is required either by his presence or participation to complete the work. For the *Oktobar '72* manifestation, exhibits sound pieces *White Space*, *Airport* and *Tumbling Building* at the Student Cultural Centre, Belgrade.

**1973.** In August she attends the Edinburgh Art Festival with the group of six and gives her first performance: *Rhythm 10*. From 1973-1974 she teaches two terms at the Teacher Training College, Novi Sad. Represented in Maurizio Spatola's *Geiger '72* which comes out in Turin.

**1974.** In February she attends the Contemporanea exhibition in Rome where she gives a repeat performance of *Rhythm 10* using 20 knives. In the course of the year, she gives another three *Rhythm* performances: *Rhythm 5* at the April Encounters in Belgrade, *Rhythm 2* in October in Zagreb and *Rhythm 4* in December in Milan. All use the body as a vehicle for ideas and action, with unpredictable consequences.

**1975.** In April and May *Rhythms 10, 5, 2, 4* and *0* are represented independently at the Salon of the Museum of Contemporary Art, Belgrade, part of the Extended Media Festival of the April Encounters. Performs *Rhythm 0* in Naples (February), *Warm/Cold* in Edinburgh (October), *Thomas Lips* in Innsbruck (November) and *Art Must be Beautiful, Artist Must Be Beautiful* (performance on video in Belgrade) and Art Festival, Copenhagen, December, some of the most radical examples of body art ever seen in Europe at the time. On her birthday, 30 November 1975, she meets German artist Ulay in Amsterdam. By the middle of the following year, they have decided to live and work together.

**1976.** Marina performs alone and in collaboration with Ulay, including three solo works from the Liberation Series: *Freeing the Voice* (Belgrade), *Freeing the Memory* (Tübingen) and *Freeing the Body* (Berlin). The idea is to exhaust mind and body in order to liberate art from acquired knowledge and re-establish it as a discipline that addresses man's existence and his prospects for change. In the summer, she performs *Role Exchange*, De Appel Gallery, Amsterdam. First joint performance with Ulay, *Relation in Space*, takes place at the Attualita Internazionali 1972-1976, 38<sup>th</sup> Venice Biennale.

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She was a member of the Association of Fine Artists of Serbia, the Belgrade Circle of Graphic Artists, the Society for the Study of New Technological Processes and an editor at *Signal* magazine. Recipient of the Youth Day May Prize 1973 and the *Sedam sekretara SKOJ-a* award in 1974.

# Exhibitions (1970-1976/77)

## 1970

### Solo

Projects for a landscape (pictures), Galerija T 70, Grožnjan, Croatia, August

*Clouds* (pictures), Youth Centre Gallery, Belgrade, November

### Group

Youth Centre Gallery, Belgrade (pictures)

Tenth October Salon (pictures), Masarik Pavillion, Belgrade, October

Class of 1965-70 (drawings), Cvijeta Zuzorić Pavillion, Belgrade

## 1971

### Solo

Project for the Sky (drawings), Atelier for Visual Arts, Zagreb

### Group

Young '70 (drawings and projects), Museum of Contemporary Art, Belgrade, January

Trinketarium, *Clouds and their Shadows*, consisting of three works: a framed peanut shell, a piece of black fur and a painted metal plaque with the number 334, Student Cultural Centre, Belgrade, June

Poesia signalista Jugoslava, TOOL Gallery, Milan, July

Action T 71, *Object* (blue painted stones in their natural surroundings), Galerija T 70, Grožnjan, July

Objects and Projects, *Freeing the View* (or Empty Space Project, blow-ups placed on Republic Square in Belgrade and the Gallery of the Student Cultural Centre - SKC). Galerija 212 and the SKC, as part of the Belgrade International Theatre Festival (BITEF), September

October '71, two sound pieces: *Tree* and *Boxes*, Gallery of the Student Cultural Centre, Belgrade, October

Biennale de l'Affiche, (poster for an exhibition of sound pieces), Warsaw

Gallery of the Graphic Collective, exhibition: Diffusing the Suns' Rays (drawings), Belgrade

## 1972

### Solo

Projects for Sky, Earth, Sea (drawings), Gallery of the Student Cultural Centre, Belgrade

## Group

Young Artists, Young Critics: *Forest, Footsteps, Sound Corridor War* (sound pieces), Museum of Contemporary Art, Belgrade, January- February

First April Encounters, exhibition of works for the competition "Games with Oneself, an Object and Light" (drawings), Gallery of the Student Cultural Centre, Belgrade, April

Exhibition by students of Krsto Hegedušić's Master Workshop, pictures, Moderna Gallery, Maribor, Slovenia, May

Fifth Zagreb Salon: *Sound Corridor* and Projects for Sky, Earth, Sea (drawings), City Gallery, Zagreb, May

*Oktobar '72* manifestation, *White Space, Airport, Space Wired for Sound/Tumbling Building* (sound pieces), Gallery of the Student Cultural Centre, Belgrade, October

## 1973

### Solo

Empty Sky (drawings), Club of the Foreign Ministry, Belgrade.

*Freeing the Horizon* (slides, installations), Gallery of the Student Cultural Centre, Belgrade, June

### Group

Materials '73, photo documentation of sound pieces, Contemporary Art Gallery, Niš, February

Spans 73, Serbian Art 1969-1973, *White Space*, Contemporary Art Gallery, Zagreb, April

Second April Encounters, Extended Media Festival, proposal for a sound piece (hoofbeats fading and approaching, two metronomes ticking in different rhythms). The work was not exhibited due to technical problems), April

Documents on post-object developments in Yugoslav art 1968-1973 (two sound pieces), Salon of the Museum of Contemporary Art, Belgrade, June-July

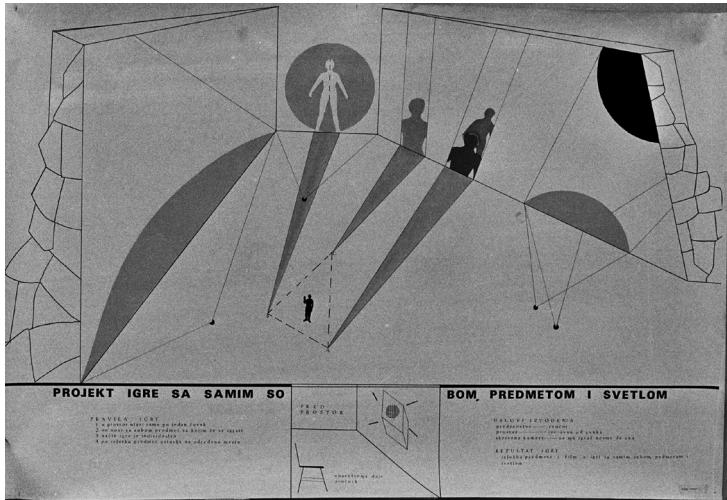
Yugoslav Art Event, *Rhythm 10* (performance with 10 knives), when the six Belgrade artists appeared at the Richard Demarco Gallery, Edinburgh, August

Record as Art Works, Galerie Françoise Lambert, Milan.

## 1974

### Solo

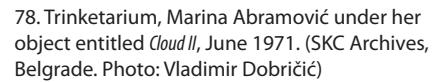
*Rhythm 10* (performance with 20 knives), Contemporanea exhibition, Villa Borghese, Rome, February

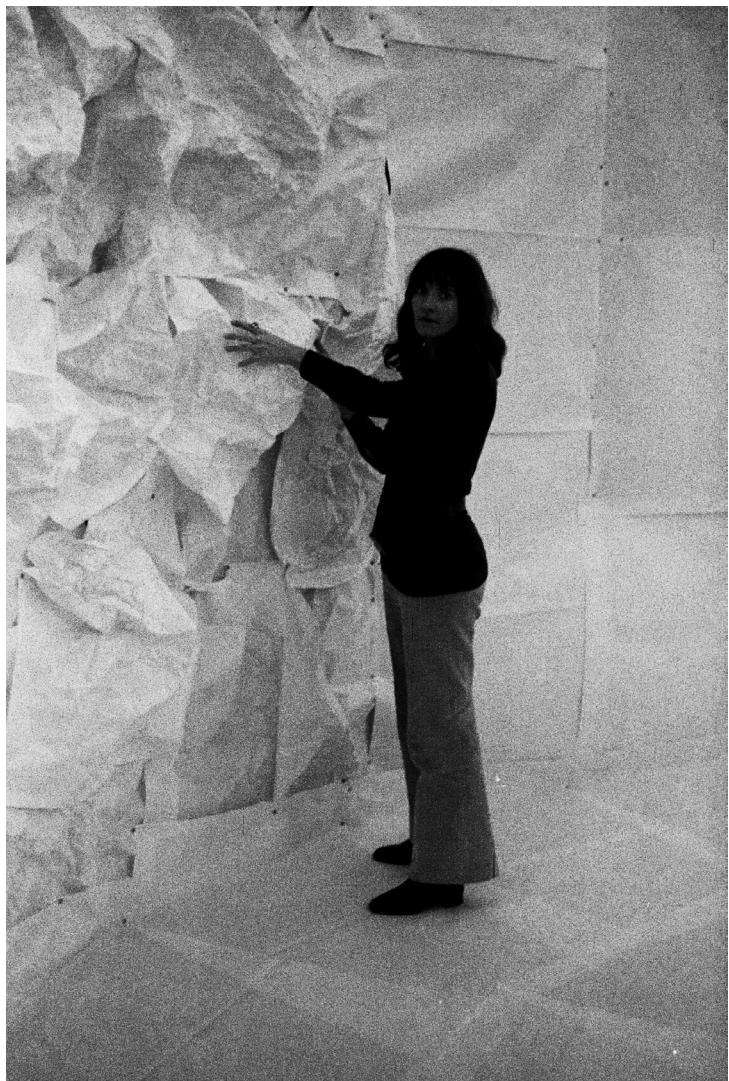


76. First April Encounters, work for a competition entitled *Games with Oneself, an Object and Light*, April 1972. (SKC Archives, Belgrade)



77. Trinketarium, Marina Abramović in front of an object by Bora Iljovski and her own *Cloud III* (a metal plate with the number 334), June 1971. (SKC Archives, Belgrade. Photo: Vladimir Dobričić)





79. *White Space*, Oktobar '72 manifestation, October 1972.  
(SKC Archives, Belgrade. Photo: Ivica Erdeljan)

80. *Tree*, Student Cultural Centre, Belgrade, October 1971. (SKC Archives, Belgrade)



*Rhythm 2* (performance and photo documentation of *Rhythm 10*), Contemporary Art Gallery, Zagreb, 14-22 October

*Rhythm 4* (performance), Galleria Diagramma, Milan, December

*Group*

Marina Abramović, Era Milivojević, Neša Paripović, Zoran Popović, Raša Todosijević, Gergelj Urkom, *Letters 1959-1973*, Gallery of the Cultural Centre, Belgrade, April

Exhibition by winners of the *Sedam sekretara SKOJ-a* award (photographs of performance of *Rhythm 5* in Belgrade), New Gallery, Zagreb, May

Signalism, Contemporary Art Gallery, Zagreb (visual poetry), May 1974.

International Exhibition of Xerox Works, Gallery of the Student Centre, Zagreb, and Gallery of the Student Cultural Centre, Belgrade, June-November

Flash Art Information, Kunsthalle, Cologne, December

**1975**

*Solo*

*Rhythm 0* (performance), Studio Morra, Naples, February

*Rhythms 10, 5, 2, 4, 0* (photo and video documentation of performances), exhibition at the Salon of the Museum of Contemporary Art, Belgrade, April – May

*Warm/Cold* (performance), Fruitmarket Gallery, Edinburgh, October

*Thomas Lips* (performance), Galerie Krinzinger, Innsbruck

*Art Must be Beautiful, Artist Must be Beautiful* (performance on video), Art Festival, Copenhagen, December

*Rhythms 10, 5, 2, 4, 0*, (photo documentation of performances), exhibition, Galerie Krinzinger, Innsbruck, Galleria Diagramma, Milan, Studio Morra, Naples.

*Group*

Signalism (Visual Poetry), Salon of the Museum of Contemporary Art, Belgrade, July-September

Ninth Youth Biennial, Paris, September

*"Oktobar '75"*, original version of "Art Must be Beautiful, Artist Must be Beautiful", October

Aspects 75, Contemporary Yugoslav Art, photo documentation of *Rhythms 10, 5, 2, 4, 0*, Richard Demarco Gallery, Edinburgh, September-October

Aspekte Gegenwartskunst aus Jugoslawien, photo documentation of *Rhythms 10, 5, 2, 4, 0*, Akademie der Bildenden Künste, Vienna, October-November

**1976**

*Solo*

*Freeing the Voice* (performance on video recorded in collaboration with the Video Heads group (Paris), guests of the Extended Media Festival in Belgrade), Fourth April Encounters, Gallery of the Student Cultural Centre, Belgrade, April

*Role Exchange*, performance, De Appel Gallery/Red Light District, Amsterdam, Summer

*Freeing the Memory*, performance on video, Galerie Ingrid Dacic, Tübingen, November

*Freeing the Body* (performance), Künstlerhaus Bethanien, Berlin.

*Group*

Yugoslav Avant-Garde Art, photo documentation of *Rhythms 10, 5, 2, 4, 0*, Wspolczesna Gallery, Warsaw, March

Photography as Art, 13 photographs from the *220 Steps* series by Neša Paripović, Gallery of Contemporary Art, Zagreb, May, Museum of Contemporary Art, Belgrade, June, and Salon Rotovž, Maribor (Slovenia), September

M. Abramović, Natalia L.L., G. Pane, (performance), Galeria Arte Verso, Genoa.

38<sup>th</sup> *Venice Biennale, Relation in Space* (performance with Ulay), June

**1977**

April Encounters, *Breathing In/Breathing Out* (performance with Ulay), Student Cultural Centre, Belgrade, April

Photo documentation of *Rhythms 10, 5, 2, 4, 0*, Magers Gallery, Bonn

Photo documentation of *Rhythms 10, 5, 2, 4, 0*, MAGMA, Verona City Museum, Verona

Photo documentation of *Rhythms 10, 5, 2, 4, 0*, Galleria Civica d'arte moderna, Modena, June

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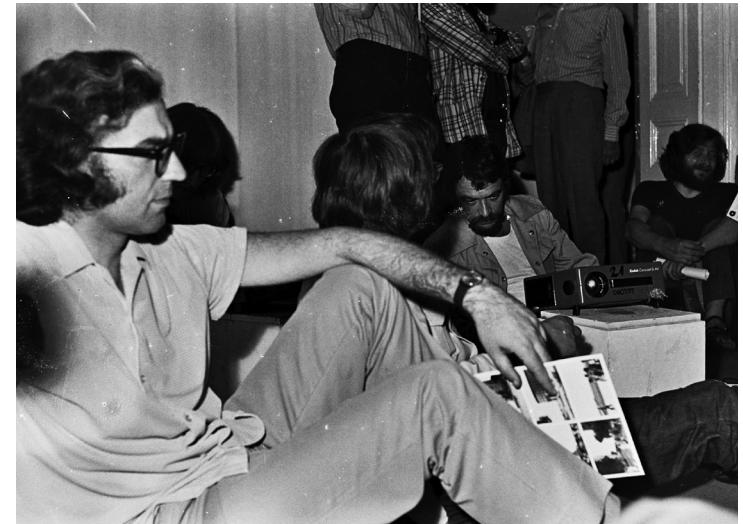
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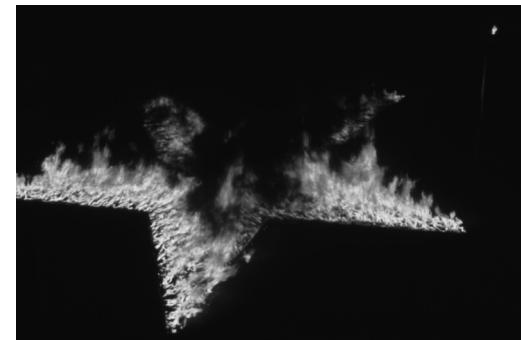
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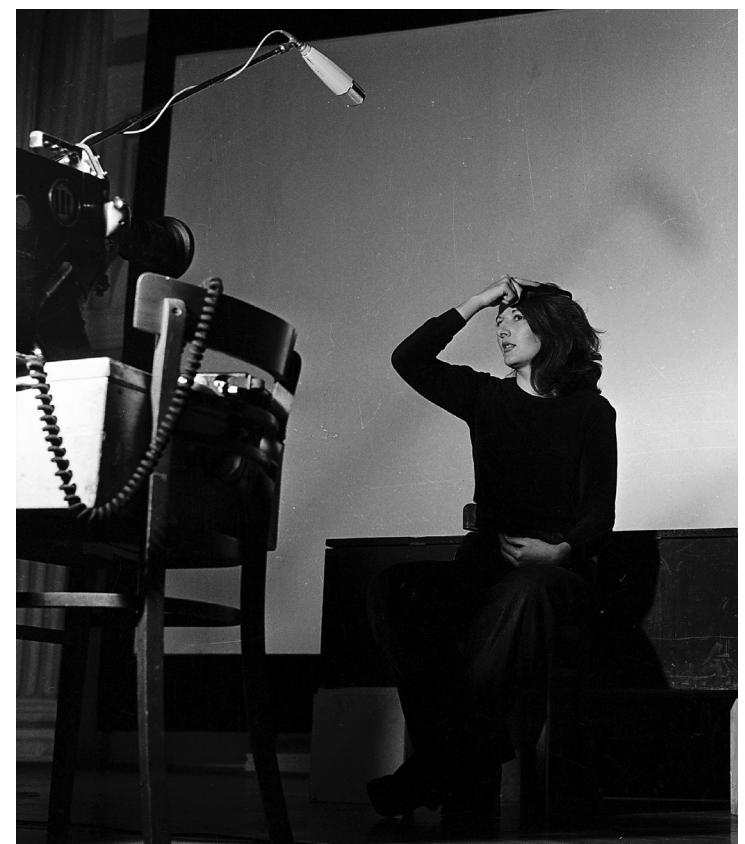
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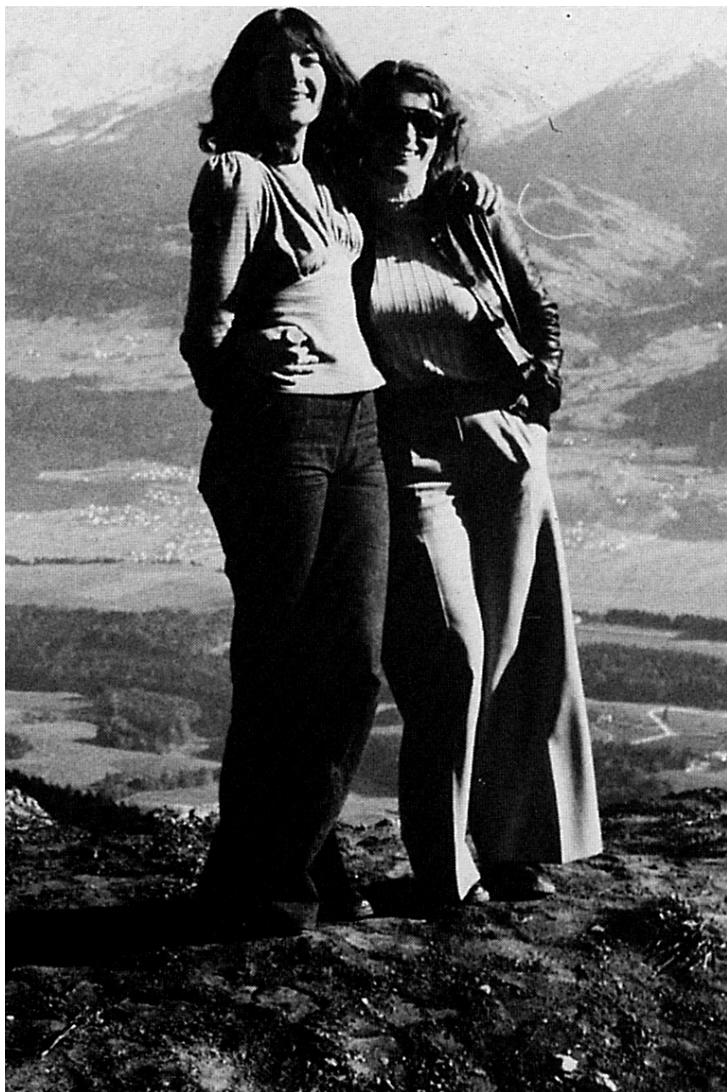
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Ješa Denegri

# MARINA ABRAMOVIĆ: Characteristics and Lessons from the Belgrade period

The sheer volume and complexity of Marina Abramović's work with all its convolutions and ramifications make it understandably difficult if not impossible for the critic to approach it in the way it deserves, especially if that critic happens to be permanently resident in Serbia. Olivera Janković has judiciously opted to focus on the artist's early Belgrade period, the single chapter in Marina's on-going story which can safely be designated as part of Serbian art history. The time span ranges from her beginnings in the early 1970s, when she was one of a group of six artists associated with the Belgrade Student Cultural Centre, up to her first encounter with Ulay and subsequent decision to join her life and work to his. What followed after this point requires a different context, as it took place in another cultural environment – albeit not always easy to pinpoint – and went on to become the work of an important and highly-rated international artist.

All artists, renowned and otherwise, have to begin somewhere and beginnings merit attention, particularly in Marina's case where they form an important chapter of her oeuvre, regardless of what later transpired and the status her works have acquired in today's art world. The birth of the five major *Rhythms* took place in Belgrade, even if most of them were performed away from home, at guest appearances in Edinburgh, Zagreb, Milan and Naples, only one being both prepared and shown in Belgrade.

The *Rhythm* cycle is much more than a chronological introduction to Marina's work. The concept, the problems it poses, are the foundation of her artistic understanding and the culmination of the Belgrade period, preceded by her participation in exhibitions with other artists of her generation such as the Trinketarium, Objects and

Projects, October '71 and '72, all held at the Student Cultural Centre, Young Artists, Young Critics at the Museum of Contemporary Art, Belgrade, Materials '73 at the Niš Art Gallery and Spans '73 at the Zagreb Gallery of Contemporary Art between 1971 and 1973. Definitively abandoning painting after her first - and last - solo exhibition in the Gallery of the Youth Centre in 1970, Marina opted for the new media, using installations, light, sound, photography and video, but only from the time of her participation in the Edinburgh Festival of August 1973. The performance of *Rhythm 10* was her first specifically physical piece, the first time she appeared in her own body before an audience in direct, live communication. This kind of work included current trends of body and performance art where the artist no longer counts on the static finality of an artwork, but in which he or she becomes the only subject of a fleeting, out-of-time artistic act and "speaks in the first person".

Each of the *Rhythms* has its own scenario, the action of each differing essentially from the others, as described in detail by the artist in the catalogue to her solo exhibition at the Salon of the Museum of Contemporary Art in Belgrade in 1975. The *Rhythm* series may be distinguished from one another by their numbers: Edinburgh 10, Belgrade 5, Zagreb 2, Milan 4, Naples 0. Before her encounter with Ulay and the commencement of their work together, Marina gave several other performances in 1975 alone: *Art Must be Beautiful, Artist Must be Beautiful* (Copenhagen), *Role Change* (Amsterdam), *Freeing the Voice* (Student Cultural Centre, Belgrade), *Freeing the Body* (Berlin) and *Freeing the Memory* (Tübingen). Together with the *Rhythms*, all these works were played out in the fevered atmosphere of the seventies, with the emergence and expansion of new art across the artistic scene at home and abroad in what today seems like a psychosis at once unique and hard to believe. It was this that led Marina to the total immersion of self with all her mental capabilities and physical strengths in these works that began and ended without any deviation, without the artist permitting herself the slightest hesitation as to the reasons for them, the way in which they were to be performed, or their ultimate objectives.

However the outward manifestations of these works may differ from one another, they are bound firmly together by a single fundamental conceptual and operational principle, and that is the ratio of conscious to unconscious in the initial phases and as the work progresses. In each of her performances, Marina sets out from a conscious

decision as to what should take place in each individual piece. She then embarks on the uncertainty entailed in carrying it out, leaving the action up to unpredictable circumstances which as often as not change the direction in which it was going, or the end objective. The principle is founded on one of the constants of universal artistry, regardless of epoch, style or technique: the principle of plan-and-happenstance, meaning that there is always a prior project, but that the initial idea is left to the vagaries of the numerous contingencies which may arise. She invests enormous energy in every piece, harnessing all her mental and bodily resources, unsparing of herself and unflinching in the face of potential and real danger to life and limb. The guiding thread and final message of the performances from Marina's Belgrade period and, indeed, her entire work, is that everything we do in this life and everything the artist does in his or her art must be carried through to the end. It is a statement of a strong morality, adhered to by the artist herself and transmitted by her to others, of whom she expects and demands the same measure of involvement.

It was in Marina Abramović's initial Belgrade period that this essential characteristic became embedded in her own understanding of art, and it is what makes this period vital and fundamental to an understanding of her work and what she is.

Slavko Timotijević

# A Brief Review: Re-creasing a Well-ironed History

It is undeniable that Marina Abramović is the most successful artist ever to emerge from the Southeast Balkans. In a lengthy career in performance art - her chosen genre - her systematic exploration of problematic and extreme aspects of body and mind, feeling and sensitivity, have brought her to the supreme position she now occupies in contemporary art.

I deliberately do not point to Serbia as her working and existential milieu for the simple reason that Marina Abramović is by conviction a Yugoslav and a cosmopolitan; her parents were Yugoslavs, Partisans and members of the Communist International. The first beginnings of what was to become her life's work were from 1971 to 1976 in the ghetto-like, ex-territorial, non-national - or rather international - atmosphere of the Student Cultural Centre in Belgrade before she moved to Amsterdam to pursue an international career.

Another reason for not linking Marina's work to this particular geopolitical area is because her art is not the product of local tradition, although the likelihood of the existence of a tradition or background with which it might be associated has not been fully explored. For this reason, her work, like that of other conceptual artists, has not been well received in Serbia; her qualities were not recognized at the time or later, not even today when it is enough to open any professional art magazine, surf the internet, glance through the host of coffee-table books published outside Serbia or simply run an eye down her CV to realize the high regard in which this exceptional artist is held. To this should be added the tragic fact that despite the benevolence and tolerance she has unfailingly shown in all contacts with her home country, re-

curring wrongs, both professional and political, false promises, failures and delays eventually drove her away from the cultural life of Serbia, a place she now visits only as a private individual, on a Montenegrin passport.

As a third reason I would cite the fact that up to now, no professional institution or distinguished individual of those publicly claimed to be the founding fathers of conceptual art in this country has written or published a single properly planned, structured monograph, book or publication on the work or personality of Marina Abramović.

Translated into a journalist's language, this adds up to arrogance, bureaucracy, unprofessionalism and a deliberate undermining of the artistic system. I cite these facts in order to illustrate the symptom of the bureaucratic octopus which even today manages to prevent great artists from making a full contribution to their country of birth.

They also highlight the environment in which young art historians take their first steps into the world of art history and critique: where not even the most important names in international art have been systematically introduced, where art history is deliberately ad-hoc and disoriented, a construct lacking the rules of the profession, deprived of professional journals, media representation and, ultimately, of logical, reasonable, retrospective, monographic or recapitulatory exhibitions, presented in a creative way in order to cultivate collective and public memory, thus providing the artistic system with much-needed feedback. For, let us not forget, art is ultimately created in the public sphere.

This is why I have today accepted with gratitude and a sense of responsibility to make this contribution to the first book on Marina Abramović to appear in this country, written by Olivera Janković and published by the Bel Art Gallery, Novi Sad.



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Olivera Janković ; translator Mary Thompson Popović. - Novi  
Sad : Bel Art Gallery, Vojvodina Museum of Contemporary  
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“ ... In the desperation of the present time, Marina Abramović has not managed to renounce her own alienation and the surviving remnants of happiness (a symptom of the alienation); having refused to express herself through cold metaphor, she now attempts to approach life with the tools of her own physicality and behaviour. The first condition, naturally, is to break with the Renaissance conception of space as something measured, organised, in harmony with the illusion of perspective. She then goes on to occupy the quotidian space in which her artist's imagination lives. She achieves a balance between the external world and the spirituality of her own external world, so unquestioningly geared towards life and understood as a primary necessity, one tending not simply to emphasise the mental or irrational level of consciousness, but whose aim is to show the real structure of the person in order to make it fully functional. Where there is no longer any separation and the body is not a technical means of transmitting messages, it itself becomes the message.”

*Achile Bonito Oliva*

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*Ješa Denegri*

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