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Body Pressure. Opposite from above: Action Pants; Genital Panic. The Conditioning from Self-Portrait(s). All images from Seven Easy Pieces, 2005. All images courtesy: the artist and Sean Kelly Gallery, New York. Photos: Kathryn Carr

MARINA ABRAMOVIC

JAY MURPHY

THE inspiration for Marina Abramovic's seven nights of performance at the Guggenheim Museum over November 9–15 2005, *Seven Easy Pieces*, was 'a very simple idea' – the re-assertion of copyright, control and 'dignity' over several of the unquestioned 'classics' of performance art. Tired of being 'ripped off... in every single media', Abramovic sought to reclaim her own images, along with those of other seminal performance artists, 'to put them in history' for the following generations. Although *Seven Easy Pieces* was long in gestation, the turning point for Abramovic may have been eight years ago with the 16-page spread in *Vogue* magazine by photographer Steven Meisel that appeared to replay each movement of Abramovic's 1976 performance, with her then partner and collaborator Ulay, *Relation in Space*. By asking each artist or estate for permission to 're-do' the work, and paying fees to do so, Abramovic aimed to re-affirm the 'originality of that piece and nothing else'. Abramovic chose key performances she strongly admired – by Bruce Nauman, Gina Pane, Joseph Beuys, Vito Acconci, and Valie Export – that, like many a performance studies scholar, she had not personally witnessed or seen. Abramovic's project may strike one as similar to rock n' roll stars trying to stop internet piracy of their music, and as particularly untimely given the challenges in other fields to dinosaur intellectual property laws (often broached

by innovative new media works) in the growing recognition of the collective quality of any creation, artistic or otherwise. But Abramovic's *Seven Easy Pieces*, in her characteristic confrontational manner, put in an especially visceral and spacious way all the dilemmas of performance art: its 'repeatability', its reliance on the archive provided by other media, its precarious difference from theatre, its challenge even at this late date to the definition of 'art' and its encapsulation by the art institution, and most especially, its fragile dependence on the potentials and limitations of the human body.

Abramovic may present her case as a straightforward and prosaic copyright claim, but *Seven Easy Pieces*, with its dramatic re-presentation of 'pure performance', for seven hours each, emphasising Abramovic's championing of the durational aspect of performance, also convincingly partook of the ritualistic if not shamanistic nature of much of the most affecting performance art. From the beginning of her career Abramovic has deliberately evoked such comparisons, with performances featuring feats of endurance, body scarification and extreme risk. Abramovic claimed the spiritual or shamanistic origins for performance along with talismanic works by Joseph Beuys, James Lee Byars, Carolee Schneemann, Ana Mendieta, and many others. Abramovic dismisses as 'idealistic and romantic



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How to Explain Pictures to a Dead Hare from *Seven Easy Pieces*, 2005. Courtesy: the artist and Sean Kelly Gallery, New York. Photo: Attilio Maranzano

notions' much of what is often seen as so appealing about the 'golden age' of performance – its ephemeral quality, its liveness, its escape from categorisation and the confusion of institutionalisation. For someone who came to meticulously document and control the direction and quality of the visual and aural recording of her performances, there is not much virtue in the cruddy video or single photograph, however iconic, that doesn't accurately convey the thread of the performance. *Seven Easy Pieces* is thus an extremely ambitious attempt to give some of the signature works of performance art a lasting, ritualistic and indelible imprimatur.

In process for almost 15 years, the beginnings of *Seven Easy Pieces* may go back as far as Abramovic's periods of residence with the Australian aborigines in 1979–83, her time spent in various deserts of the planet (the Sahara, the Gobi, the Tarr), and practice of meditation learnt from Tibetan lamas. In aboriginal rites the process of preparing the ground and sand, its stamping by the women's feet, followed by its anointing with the blood of the males, is all extraordinarily precise and ordered, based on a meticulous memory. In Abramovic's experience, the aboriginal traditions change little if at all in lines of direct oral transmission. It made quite a contrast to what she sees not so much as an 'oral tradition' as the 'mystifications', gossip, and hearsay that are passed down as the history of performance. Abramovic calls herself an 'archaeologist' in seeking to duplicate such ritual processes for historical and contemporary performance. Although a notion of 'pure energy exchange' is present from Abramovic's earliest performances, these indigenous rituals helped illuminate and fine-tune such

responses, demonstrating the rigour, the ritual stamp, she was searching for. This creation of performance as transformative ritual is reflected in Abramovic's painstaking work in Europe training students in performance, again seeking to pass on the skills of arduous, durational performance to the next generation of practitioners. As documented in her book *Student Body* (2003), her students are led through a no-man's land poised somewhere between the rigours of Jerzy Grotowski's 'poor theatre' and serious Zen Buddhist meditation practice. Emulating her own earlier nomadic peregrinations with Ulay, students are sent off to live in the countryside with no food for five days, do 'exercises' that include opening and closing a door for three hours, or being woken and asked the first word that comes to mind, that later becomes the basis for a performance. In what can be easily seen as an extension of the project of *Seven Easy Pieces*, Abramovic is curating a series of long durational performances with her students for presentation next year that features 45 students from 22 different countries across Europe (including two Americans). Just as the performers need a 'tough and difficult' initiation, for Abramovic the audience, too, needs preparation on how to see and experience performance: 'it's still very 19th century how people experience art. We need to change the way they absorb and see it.'

'The only time I have is in my performance,' Abramovic claims, affirming what she sees as the need to personally experience long performances. Only through the means of the long performance can the sort of 'elevation' Abramovic experiences after some 35 years of performing be conveyed: 'there is a kind of pure energy, pure presence. They can relax, stop worrying, or rushing to the



Balkan Erotic Epic, 2006. Courtesy: Hangar Bicocca, Milan and Galleria Lia Rumma, Milan and Naples. Below: *Entering the Other Side from Seven Easy Pieces*, 2005. Courtesy: the artist and Sean Kelly Gallery, New York. Photo: Kathryn Carr

phone. It's like taking instructions in a cookbook. They can breathe deeply, and start watching.' After years of intense nervousness and stage fright, even for a lecture, Abramovic says she has come to feel that 'just being present is very important. Now I just go there – you know what people need. The public gets the impression, the transfer. It radiates. It's a question of effect you make not just with your body, or with your mind. It's beyond that.' These qualities were perhaps most alive in Abramovic's performance of her own earlier work, *Lips of Thomas* (1975), in which her ritualised, naked journey involved eating a kilo of honey, drinking a bottle of wine, carving and re-carving a five-point star on her stomach with razor blades, flagellating herself 'until I no longer feel any pain,' and lying down on a cross of ice. Responding to the occasion of the Guggenheim's exhibition 'Russia!' (2005-6), Abramovic, whose father, a Yugoslav general, met Abramovic's mother during the partisan campaigns in World War II, at one point in the cycle of actions would don a military cap and boots, and pick up a white flag blotted with her own blood while a Russian folk song was playing – 'The war is our eternal cross/Long live our Slavic faith'. Since Abramovic's performance began an hour before the Guggenheim's usual closing time, visitors whose chief aim was to view 15th century icons featuring Christ and Church Fathers, caught a glimpse of a quite different religious attitude. Time had not effaced much of the pain and power of *Lips of Thomas*. One woman in tears called out to Abramovic to stop and then rushed out of the museum; a man, in response, called on Abramovic to keep going.

As the audience milled and gathered and conversed during the performances, Abramovic saw that they created 'a sense of community that hasn't happened here in a long time'. For Abramovic, 'I heard that Martha Graham had said that wherever a dancer dances is holy ground, for me wherever the public stands is holy'. Listed as one of the primary attractions of the more than 40 performance events of Performa '05 that month in New York, Abramovic in *Seven Easy Pieces* put on a convincing display for her brand of performance – 'in the end it's not about story or complexity. The main thing is just there is someone standing there naked. That true presence, that chemistry. It is real.'

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