

"Back for One Night Only," *Art in America*, February 2006.

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In a weeklong performance marathon, Marina Abramović re-created seminal works by five other artists; she also presented early and new pieces of her own. Her goal: securing a future for an ephemeral form of art.

In the early 1970s, which for Marina Abramović (and many others) were performance art's salad days, events were staged on the fly and on the cheap. "We never wanted to repeat things," Abramović told Nancy Spector in a public dialogue at the Guggenheim following "Seven Easy Pieces," her weeklong stint of performances there. "We never even wanted to be photographed. We were pure pure pure." Well, no longer. After decades of seeing her own performances and those of her peers "ripped off—in fashion, in film, in media," she proposed a radical response: "covering" the greatest hits of performance art. By treating the irremediably category-resistant performance form as if it were, say, popular music, and translating "instructions" as "score," a performance could be re-presented by anyone with the necessary stamina and determination (no small qualifications). If the original artists were credited and paid, the whole messy medium could be brought into the world of copyright and distribution and licensing fees—in a word, into the marketplace. To use another mouthful of a word, it could also, Abramović argues, thereby be brought into the academic discourse of history.

Those are essentially the ideas behind "Seven Easy Pieces," which was 12 years in the planning. Abramović chose performance works that were crucial to her own development, sought permission from the artists who had conceived them (or from their estates), paid for them, and credited the original performers. After what seems to have been a considerable period of dickering, the Abramović playlist ultimately included works by Bruce Nauman, Vito Acconci, Valie Export, Gina Pane, and Joseph Beuys, as well as an older piece of her own. The final performance was a new work she conceived for the Guggenheim. (Much discussion was generated by Chris Burden's denial of permission to re-create his masochistic early performances.¹ Also, there was unsurprising resistance from the museum to the revival of an earlier work by Abramović that literally placed a loaded gun in the public's hands.)

Coming from someone whose work is so closely associated with the kind of spiritual authority wielded by Beuys, the concept behind "Seven Easy Pieces" was surprisingly prosaic. So was the tenor of the artist's conver-



Marina Abramović performing Bruce Nauman's *Body Pressure* (1974) on Nov. 9, 2005. All performances at the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, New York.

sation with Spector; though in performance Abramović generally says little, and maintains a ferocious intensity of focus, out of persona she issues a cheerful, forthright and occasionally defiant deluge of talk. She bridled at a question about the perhaps insuperable difficulty of preserving a performance's meaning in a totally different social and political context. On the other hand, when someone wondered what she did to regroup after the whole grueling series at the Guggenheim was over, she gladly said she slept in and watched the *Teletubbies*. The audience loved it.

But then, she often had the audience in her palm throughout the performance marathon itself. The deepest impression of the seven-hour-long performances was the sheer force of her will. Physical strength is a big part of it, and her powers of endurance are formidable. So is her ability to connect with the public. In a 1999 interview with Janet Kaplan, she spoke of pre-show jitters. "But the moment the public is there," Abramović said, "something happens. I move from the lower self to a higher state, and the fear and nervousness stop. Once you enter into the performance state, you can push your body to do things you absolutely could never normally do."

Though the Guggenheim series was groundbreaking in its scope, precedents do exist, from Sturtevant doing Beuys in 1971, to Laura Parnes doing Mike Kelley and Paul McCarthy just a few years ago; in fact Abramović's own work has also been "covered," by five women in Amsterdam performing a piece they called Marina Positions. There is also a record of critical skepticism. RoseLee Goldberg, organizer of Performa '05, recently wrote an essay, "Performance Anxiety" [*Artforum*, Apr. '04], that challenges the importance to performance of "being there." Instead, she praised documentary photos, especially those that reveal the "no-to-virtuosity, no-to-spectacle (as Yvonne Rainer put it in her manifesto of 1965) demeanor of the performer" in Conceptual-art-era events. Tellingly, Goldberg's second example is a photograph of a recent Abramović piece (the 1997 *Balkan Baroque*), in which glossiness of image matches both performance and performer (she notes Abramović's painted toenails). Goldberg concludes that the Abramović photograph illuminates "key issues of the times: the power of mediation and iconic picture-making as well as the problems of globalization and the art marketplace."

Unquestionably, "Seven Easy Pieces" was provocative, and it mixed up audiences in a novel way. (The performances mostly began an hour before museum closing time, so visitors coming to see "Russia!" got a glimpse of Abramović—lying on a bed exposed to the flames of 15 candles, for instance, or cradling a machine gun—on their way out. Likewise, hipster art students sent by their teachers for some living history got to spend time with 15th-century Russian Orthodox icons.) And, at least provisionally, it accomplished what Abramović set out to do: transplant the fragile seedling of a long-vanished counterculture into the hyperfortified biosphere of 21st-century art, and watch in marvel as it grows.

Accounts of the individual performances were contributed by Elizabeth C. Baker; David Ebony, Leigh Anne Miller and myself.

—Nancy Princenthal

1. There was speculation about Burden's wish to distance himself from that early work. But Abramović's own motives may have been a contributing factor. In 1999, she told Janet Kaplan, "I was always very impressed by Chris Burden's crucifixion piece, *Transfixed*. What I heard in Yugoslavia, although I didn't even have a picture of it, was that Burden crucified himself on a Volkswagen, that somebody drove the Volkswagen through Los Angeles, and that he was arrested. That was my image. When I talked to Burden and to the only three witnesses, I learned that only four people saw this piece. The story was that he was in a garage with a doctor, who pulled the nails through and crucified him on the Volkswagen. Then the garage door was opened. The three friends pushed the car out of the garage, took the photograph, then put the car back into the garage. There's such a huge difference. I would ask for his permission to do the piece, but then I would do it completely differently. The idea of female sacrifice is quite interesting to me. I would like to be crucified, but not on a Volkswagen, because I don't like the car. I would choose another car. And then I would like to drive through the city, because this was my first image of the piece. And the only person who can drive this car, from my point of view, would be Madonna. I know it's completely insane." Maybe Burden thought so too. For the entire interview, see Janet Kaplan, "Deeper and Deeper: Marina Abramović," *Art Journal*, Summer 1999, pp. 7-21.

Vito Acconci's *Seedbed* (1972) on Nov. 10.



Abramović's live re-creation on Nov. 11 of a 1969 poster by Valie Export, based on Export's 1968 performance *Action Pants: Genital Panic*.

1. Bruce Nauman's *Body Pressure* (1974)

On Marina Abramović's opening night, the Guggenheim's rotunda revealed itself as a splendid and versatile performance space, the museum's lower ramps affording multiple vantage points from which to observe the action on a raised cylindrical stage. A hyperattentive audience, the smallest of the week, watched as Abramović, clad in blue jacket and pants, responded to a male voice issuing instructions from a loudspeaker. She was to press her body in various positions against a vertical sheet of thick plate glass, about 6½ feet tall, that rose from the floor at center stage. During lengthy pauses between directives, she waited, immobile; viewers maintained respectful silence. As the cycle of instructions recurred, almost nothing "happened," but for many viewers, time seemed to stop—a phenomenon which repeated itself in the best of the week's offerings.

Abramović's understated performance resembled many of Nauman's early video works based

on simple bodily actions in the studio. But it was immediately clear that she would introduce significant changes in her interpretations of works by other artists. This piece was originally presented by Nauman as part of a show titled "Yellow Body" at Düsseldorf's Konrad Fischer Gallery, Feb. 4-Mar. 6, 1974. In an empty room, he constructed a temporary wall. Instructions (identical to those issued verbally at the Guggenheim) were printed on a poster: "Press as much of the front surface of your body (palms in or out, left or right cheek) against the wall as possible. Press very hard and concentrate. . . . Think how various parts of your body press against the wall; which parts touch and which do not. . . ." And so on. Visitors to the gallery were invited to enact the orders, or not, as they wished. A performance component was only suggested.

Abramović's version brought the work to life, repeatedly, over a span of seven hours, generating just a whiff of oddly compelling drama. Flattening herself (sometimes even flinging herself, "very hard") against a freestanding glass rectangle, she seemed to imply a narrative of interaction with an impenetrable picture plane. Given the Minimalist/formalist underpinnings of much early Conceptual art, this idea may well have figured in Nauman's intentions.

—E.C.B.

2. Vito Acconci's *Seedbed* (1972)

As originally performed at the Sonnabend Gallery in New York, Jan. 15-29, 1972, *Seedbed* occurred in six-hour sessions, twice a week—three Saturdays and two Wednesdays. The artist lay on the gallery floor, hidden beneath a ramp, and engaged in what his wall text called "private sexual activity." Visitors could walk on the gently inclined ramp, or move about in the otherwise empty gallery. Acconci's prolonged efforts to "produce seed" were transmitted by a microphone. Acconci's text explained, "My aids are the visitors to the gallery . . . my fantasies about them can excite



Gina Pane's *The Conditioning* (1973) on Nov. 12.

me . . . The seed 'planted' on the floor, then, is a joint result of my performance and theirs." For their part, the visitors, entering the gallery in expectation of a visual experience, received instead a disconcerting audio experience that, even for the early '70s, was pretty strong stuff.

Abramović's recapitulation of the event at the Guggenheim differed little in its components, only slightly exceeding Acconci's in duration (and he performed the piece five times). It diverged sharply, however, in its effect. First, it was on a far grander scale. The cylindrical stage was modified for the occasion by a parapet around its perimeter and a curved flight of steps leading up from the rotunda floor. Spectators waited in line for their turn to climb up to the stage, many settling themselves comfortably in the brightly spotlighted circle. Several were dressed for a festive occasion, and their shifting configurations furnished a random visual component to the piece. Below the stage, unseen, the indefatigable Abramović softly murmured her thoughts and plaintively noted the difficulties of her task; moans periodically signaled her successes. Recounting the experience later to *New York* magazine, she said, "I . . . had to have orgasms. I don't fake it—I never fake anything . . . I ended with nine orgasms. It was terrible for the next piece—I was so exhausted!" She added, "I heard that people had a great time; it was like a big party up there."

Indeed, those attendees who did not opt for the limelight milled convivially on the ramps, exchanging tips on where best to hear Abramović's elusive utterances. Though public mores are in some respects less permissive today than in 1972, the originally transgressive but now legendary event had become, over the years, somewhat neutralized in its impact. —E.C.B.

3. Valie Export's *Action Pants: Genital Panic* (1968/69)

For round three in her arduous seven-night run, Abramović presented her interpretation of Valie Export's 1968 *Action Pants: Genital Panic*. As

with many of her other reenactments that week, Abramović had very little archival material on which to base her performance, nearly 40 years after the original. Export's action took place during a film screening in Munich, in front of an unsuspecting—and mostly male—art cinema crowd. The Austrian performance artist entered the darkened theater and marched through each row in a pair of crotchless pants, challenging the audience to confront "the real thing" while watching representations of female sexuality on screen. Many patrons were so offended that they left the theater.

Abramović took her cue from an extension of Export's one-time performance: a series of posters printed the next year in which Export presented herself wearing the same pants, seated on a chair, one leg propped up to expose her genitals, in sling-back heels and a wild mane of hair, gripping a machine gun close to her body and staring defiantly into the camera. Abramović, in head-to-toe black, wore tight jeans with the crotch cut out, a leather bomber jacket and combat boots. As in Export's poster, Abramović, legs spread, planted herself in a chair with a gun slung across her chest—an action that held particular resonance on Veteran's Day, when the performance took place. She periodically strode from one side of the circular platform to the other, pausing to stare deeply at rapt viewers milling around the stage.

While less physically strenuous and dangerous than many of her later pieces would be, this per-

formance included some unexpected action, thanks to a man who tried to mount the stage (Abramović did not flinch) and was swiftly subdued by Guggenheim security staff. More affecting, a young woman who maintained prolonged eye contact with the artist was silently moved to tears. The setting and circumstances of Abramović's performance—bright lights, a lack of spontaneity, the large crowd, to name a few—were so drastically different from Export's surprise intrusion into a darkened theater that it was difficult, though not impossible, to sense the original encounter's challenge to the ways the female body is perceived and objectified. —L.A.M.

4. Gina Pane's *The Conditioning* (1973)

Perhaps an even more determined masochist than Abramović, Gina Pane performed *The Conditioning* in 1973 as a half-hour-long event at Galerie Stadler in Paris. Deploying what seems explicitly religious iconography, she stretched out on a bed made of iron with broadly spaced cross-bars, beneath which 15 candles burned, the tips of their flames a barely tolerable distance from her body. Abramović changed only the work's duration. Extending it to seven hours meant working through seven sets of 15 candles each; roughly once an hour, Abramović, clothed in a gray work-suit and heavy black boots, rolled her visibly over-



Joseph Beuys's *How to Explain Pictures to a Dead Hare* (1965) on Nov. 13.

heated body off the bed, snuffed any tapers still burning, replaced them and lit the new set. Those moments of respite, oddly, were the most transfixing; with Abramović on her knees rooting around beneath the bed, which under the circumstances seemed an almost ordinary thing to do, the audience grew quiet. When she resumed her clearly torturous place on the bed—a grill that inescapably evoked the one on which St. Lawrence was martyred—the level of general conversation and movement around her picked up instantly. —N.P.



Abramović's *Lips of Thomas* (1975) on Nov. 14.

5. Joseph Beuys's *How to Explain Pictures to a Dead Hare* (1965)

Taking on Beuys requires a special kind ofchutzpah, with which Abramović is well endowed. Though she disclaims the ambiguously spiritual and openly political authority that Beuys wielded, she admits formative attraction to his charisma. In her re-creation of his landmark performance, presented as a three-hour event at Düsseldorf's Galerie Schmela in 1965, Abramović retained Beuys's props—the dead hare, of course, and the chalkboards, dustpan, felt-covered stool and jar of honey—and attire, including gold-leaf-covered hair and face, khaki pants and iron-plated shoe. All of these things have particular significance in Beuys's iconography, and those meanings remained available to knowledgeable viewers (honey, because it is “a living substance,” is like thought; felt is like the wrappings that kept the artist alive when he crash-landed during WWII, and so on). Most changed from the original, it seems, were Abramović's physical and emotional attitude toward the still-soft and creepily alive-looking animal, an attitude that was alternately maternal (there was a fair amount of cradling and cuddling; an association to the Madonna was hard to resist) and clerical (when she raised her finger, it seemed meant more in benediction than pedagogy or exhortation). Arguably, the implications of the gender switch were more far-reaching than with *Seedbed*, where, for all its aggression, power relations—even one as limited as the rapport between a teacher and his furry woodland student—were not at issue. —N.P.

6. Marina Abramović's *Lips of Thomas* (1975)

Because there was a kind of logical progression to the sequence of revivals in “Seven Easy Pieces,” *Lips of Thomas*, the only work Abramović reprised from her own repertory (she first presented it in October 1975 at the Galerie Krinzinger in Innsbruck) seemed a kind of culmination (or, for the faithful, apotheosis). If the Nauman piece was the

most minimalist in every way, and the Acconci represented a fairly big jump in psychological charge (while, it could be said, being just as formally reductive as the Nauman), and if Acconci's hotbed led to Pane's as inexorably as Pane's religious references led to Beuys's, then *Lips of Thomas*, which used elements from all, was the perfect summation. Originally two hours long, the performance, both in 1975 and 30 years later, involved an incremental orgy of consumption and self-mutilation. Over the course of the night, a naked Abramović slowly ate a kilo of honey, drank a bottle of wine, cut and re-cut a five-pointed star into her abdomen with a series of razor blades, lay down on a cruciform arrangement of ice blocks and whipped herself raw. New elements included slipping into and out of an army cap and boots, to the accompaniment of a rousing Slavic anthem, and raising a white flag marked with the blood she had blotted from her stomach. Beuysian elements included the jar of honey and the military references; the extreme form of self-exposure was a good match for *Seedbed*, as were the self-mutilation and formal rigor for the works by Pane and Nauman respectively. But Abramović certainly made these qualities her own. The series' most physically demanding performance, *Lips of Thomas* was also its most controversial. That compulsive eating and self-laceration are now as firmly associated with adolescent disorders as with religious transport has shifted the work's meaning, without making it less provocative, or painful to watch. —N.P.

7. Marina Abramović's *Entering the Other Side* (2005)

After Abramović's punishing performance of *The Lips of Thomas* the previous night, some devotees were relieved to find the artist looking radiant and in repose for the seventh and final event of the series. Perched for seven hours atop a towering scaffolding, some 16 feet above the floor of the museum rotunda, Abramović was clad in an elaborate dress

created for the occasion by Italian designer Aziz. Reminiscent of Beverly Semmes's oversized garments, the dress was made of many yards of shiny blue fabric cascading over a flaring armature about 25 feet in diameter at the bottom. Wearing tasteful makeup and with her flowing brunette locks freshly coiffed, Abramović looked like a doll decorating the pinnacle of an enormous birthday cake.

The performance was simple and subdued compared with the earlier works in the series, and while it may have appeared as such, it was not merely a narcissistic exercise. According to the artist, the piece's title, *Entering the Other Side*, refers to the fact that after revisiting the past in the previous six performances, she now occupied the present moment and looked toward the future. Sometimes standing and sometimes seated on a little stool hidden beneath the fabric, Abramović silently repeated a series of graceful gestures with her hands and outstretched arms as she slowly twisted her body from side to side, periodically making eye contact with individuals in the audience. As if in a trance or a state of elevated consciousness, she appeared to beckon all those around her. And, like the Pythia at the Delphic oracle, she seemed determined to convey some prophetic and profound truth. At the end of the evening, as midnight approached, she spoke to the audience. She asked everyone to close their eyes and contemplate the notion of being in the present, together in the same space and at the same point in time. Then, after a moment, she asked everyone to open their eyes again. —D.E.



Abramović's *Entering the Other Side* (2005) on Nov. 15. All photos this article Kathryn Carr, © Solomon R. Guggenheim Foundation, New York.