

# SEAN KELLY

Heiser, Jörg. "Do it Again," *Frieze*, Issue 94, October 2005.

## frieze

### Do It Again

In conversation with **Marina Abramovic**



Marina Abramovic: Monica, I really like your piece *Hausfrau Swinging* [1997] – a video that combines sculpture and performance. Have you ever performed this piece yourself?

Monica Bonvicini: No, although my mother said, 'you have to do it, Monica – you have to stand there naked wearing this house'. I replied, 'I don't think so'. In the piece a woman has a model of a house on her head and bangs it against a dry-wall corner; it's related to a Louise Bourgeois drawing from the 'Femme Maison' series [Woman House, 1946–7], which I had a copy of in my studio for a long time. I actually first shot a video of myself doing the banging, but I didn't like the result at all: I was too afraid of getting hurt. So I thought of a friend of mine who is an actor: she has a great, strong body – a little like the woman in the Louise

Bourgeois drawing that inspired it – and I knew she would be able to do it the right way.

Jörg Heiser: Monica, after you first showed *Wall Fuckin'* in 1995 – a video installation that includes a static shot of a naked woman embracing a wall, with her head outside the picture frame – you told me one critic didn't talk to you for two years because he was upset it wasn't you. It's an odd assumption that female artists should only use their own bodies. I'm thinking of Yves Klein 'directing' naked women ...

MA: Or Manzoni signing female bodies. I think it's fine to use an actor. It's like conducting, or choreographing.

MB: I never ask actors to 'get into the role' – I'm not interested in their interpretation of what they are doing. I just ask them to do something very simple, like fucking the wall or banging their head against it. It is nothing psychological.

MA: If you don't feel that you're a performer yourself, then it's so much better to have the idea executed by someone else. And that relates to a question that interests me more and more: what do you do as a performance artist when you get old and you can't do it any more? How can you transmit some kind of experience and knowledge to a younger generation? It's important that my pieces can happen without me, because I have been a performer all my life, and I know that at some point in the future I won't be able to perform, or won't want to.

JH: But in your upcoming re-enactments of seminal performances by other artists from the 1960s and '70s at the Guggenheim New York in November, isn't it the point that you perform them yourself?

MA: I am doing them because I feel that I am the only one left of my generation who is still performing. And I feel that I want to set history straight, because there are so many commercial rip-offs, like Steven Meisel, for example – his recent fashion spread in *Vogue* is like Orlan with her plastic surgery. Fashion

takes art out of context and uses only the surface. Theatre also rips off performance like you can't imagine; and of course it happens in art too. A lot of kids are doing copies. So my attitude is, if you want to do a performance originally done by someone else, it's fine if you treat it like, say, a musical score. But you have to have a few rules. For my re-enactments I have asked the artists or their foundations for permission. I asked Chris Burden for permission to perform *Trans-Fixed* [1974], the piece that involved him being nailed to the hood of a Volkswagen, and his assistant sent me a letter saying, 'not this piece, not any piece'. And I replied, 'great, I respect this, but tell me why'. The assistant wrote back saying, 'Mr Burden doesn't talk publicly'. And this pissed me off. Fine, but I think he should have explained his reasons. I am very disappointed about this, because I really wanted to do this piece. The woman crucified, finally. I wanted to do it on a Volga, which was designed in the Tito era, though, instead of a Volkswagen.

JH: Who are the other artists you contacted?

MA: I will be performing Bruce Nauman's *Body Pressure* [1974], which is like a script – a piece of paper that you can take home and which gives you instructions how to press your body against the wall, the floor, and the corners of the room. It's kind of an in-between piece – he didn't actually perform it; I doubt anyone actually did at the time.

JH: So it's a score, an instruction piece in the sense of a work by George Brecht or Yoko Ono?

MA: Yes. I'm also doing *Seed Bed* [1972] by Vito Acconci – the one where he masturbates under a floor in the gallery. That will be followed by Valie Export's *Action Pants: Genital Panic* [1969], where she's wearing a pair of trousers with the crotch removed. Then Gina Pane's *Self Portrait(s)* [1973], where she's lying on a metal bed above lit candles, and using a razor blade to make incisions around her fingernails and lips and *How To Explain Pictures to a Dead Hare* [1965], by Joseph Beuys. Bad videos or a few lousy photographs are the only documents remaining of so much of this stuff; the only image we have of the Beuys performance is of him with his face covered in gold and honey. You can't imagine how differently this piece looks once you see more material. I went to see Eva Beuys, his widow, after I had sent her a letter asking for permission, but she had never replied. I showed up with my luggage; it was raining, I rang the bell, and she opened the door and said, 'Frau Abramovic, my answer is no – but you can have coffee'. I went in, and we talked for five hours, about her 45 law cases against everything and everybody, about my reasons for redoing the piece, and we both cried and held hands and now everything is fine. She gave me an unauthorized video of the performance. It became apparent that Beuys never gave the photographers any instructions; the famous one doesn't represent the piece well at all.

JH: Which of your own works will you be performing?

MA: Originally I wanted to do *Rhythm 0* [1974] as the sixth piece, which involves me standing while the audience is invited to use all kinds of objects on me, but I went to every lawyer in New York and they won't let me include a pistol with a bullet on display. So I will do *Thomas Lips* [1975] instead, which is a very ritualistic, complicated piece. The seventh and final piece will be the première of a new performance.

JH: Will you be doing these seven performances on seven consecutive days?

MA: Yes, and whether their original length was 15 minutes or an hour, I will perform them for seven hours each, because that's how long most museums are open. The point for me is to show how you can pay homage to historical works. I have never seen the original of any of these pieces; I have no idea how it will feel to perform them, and that's why I want to do it. With each of the artists or their estate, I have a contract where I specify that all the photographs of the performances will only be published in the book I'm making, that I will not make any art work out of it, or editions – except for my own performances, of course. So I don't have any kind of gain – and I don't want any fee.

JH: What if another artist wants to perform any of your pieces?

MA: That's fine. I'm fed up with the Modernist attitude that nobody can ever repeat a piece because it's an original touched by the divine artist. I'm not ready to see my performances die. In a work of mine for a

theatre, *The Biography* [1992– ongoing], I act my own life; the idea is that every five or six years I will make a new version of it – it includes some of my performances, and now I have my students playing me in *The Biography Remix* [2004– ongoing, directed by Michel Laub]. *Rest Energy* [1980], which I made with my then partner, Ulay, is one of our most difficult pieces to perform – together we hold a bow drawn with an arrow pointing at my heart. I recently did it with Ulay's son, who is the same age Ulay was at that time; after a while I stop and transfer the performance to one of my students.

JH: This touches on complicated issues of intellectual property – the question of defining the differences between a legitimate re-enactment, a quote, a distortion and a rip-off.

MA: Everyone has their own opinion on this. Like the bow and arrow piece – if somebody wanted to redo it, it's very difficult to do it in any other way than the way I did it. In the case of Monica's *Bourgeois* reference – that's inspiration, in the way I was inspired by Yves Klein, or Fluxus, and performance, or noise music. But it's different if you do it in exactly the same way. There was a couple in New Zealand in the 1970s who redid every performance Ulay and I were doing at the time, but they always did it a couple of months later, because that's how long it took for information about our performances to get to them.

JH: There is a difference, though, between two New Zealand artists recreating your performances and a fashion photographer using your work for a commercial international ad campaign.

MA: Yes, the fashion aspect is worse for me, because the art is taken out of context. Meisel even recreated one image from *Relation in the Space* [1976], for *Italian Vogue* [November 1998], where I bump into Ulay and fall to the ground. He just added this empty fashion touch, which I can't stand. When I sent a letter to him through my lawyer, the reply I got was, 'he is very inspired by your work'.

MB: Today performances are becoming more and more specialized, staged, theatrical. What do you make of this development?

MA: In the 1980s there was a huge change, because the market became so much more demanding. For an artist to make performances for all of her or his life would be hell. Many performance artists from the 1970s went into architecture, like Acconci. Only a few artists, such as Beuys, did performances all their life. I will probably do performance for the rest of my life too. Also I don't like seats – they give you expectations, as if you were in a theatre or cinema.

JH: Why are you doing the theatre piece then?

MA: That's the only exception – it's a work in progress, a staging of my life. And it's going to keep going even if I have Alzheimer's disease or I'm in a wheelchair.

JH: So the only place you can talk about your life is on stage?

MA: Yes, theatre is the only way for me to reveal things I am ashamed of – for example, my nose being too big and my ass being too large, and the war in Yugoslavia, which I left in 1975. People often see me as a tough, no make-up, spiritual girl, but I am not like that at all. I totally love fashion and bad movies and bad jokes and eat chocolate like there's no tomorrow. My performances are always so heavy, though, which is why I put an image of me on the beach holding a beach ball on the cover of my catalogue *Artist Body* [1998]. Rebecca Horn said to me, 'you're crazy, people will think it's an advert for a travel agent – no one will respect it'. But I need that lightness. Monica, why did you leave Italy for Berlin?

MB: I left in 1986 for many reasons, but mostly because Italy's macho society was bothering me. I used to go to high school on my bicycle, and every day guys in their cars would yell things at me. Eventually I started to scream back, and once they stopped and slapped me. They were really offended.

JH: Monica, much of your work deals with architecture, which is a field very much dominated by men: the only really famous woman architect is Zaha Hadid.

MB: Like art, architecture is studied by more women than men, but it's the men who tend to become the professionals. There are no comparable support structures for women.

JH: Marina, what is the relationship between your performances and architecture?

MA: Many of my 1970s' performances concerned the body – often naked – in relation to architectural space. Many of my pieces have titles such as *Expansion in the Space* [1977], *Interruption in the Space* [1977], *Relation in the Space* [1976] or *Relation in Time* [1977]. I've never had an architectural space built, though – I either worked with given or pre-chosen spaces.

JH: You recently redid one of your pieces – *Cleaning the Mirror II* [1995; originally performed for video] – in the Art Unlimited section of Art Basel: a skeleton lies on top of you. This was not the first time you've done a performance at an art fair: in 1978 you performed *Light/Dark*, where you and Ulay slap each other's faces, at Cologne Art Fair.

MA: It's fantastic, because art fairs are the place where performances don't belong at all. In the 1995 video I was just breathing with the skeleton lying on top of me. This time I cried for four hours.

MB: At one point you looked at me and maybe you didn't recognize me, but I really felt touched, because nobody wants to see someone crying.

MA: When I do performances, I really go into another state of mind. I was worried about how I could start crying and not fake it – it had to be believable. Nothing happened for the first 15 minutes, but then this couple arrived – Eva and Adele – and after that I started, and I couldn't stop. These people break my heart.

MB: What part of this work is for sale?

MA: All you can buy is the video of 1995. The proper documentation of performances on video has been an issue for a long time – in the 1970s, when Gina Pane did *Self-Portrait(s)*, the only thing you see in the documentation is the bag of the photographer. If you have an audience, the camera's viewpoint is often obscured. I remember the first time I used video was in 1975, to document *Art Must be Beautiful, Artist Must be Beautiful* [1975] in Copenhagen. I combed my hair violently for an hour in front of the audience and went back to see what the cameraman had shot, and he had been doing every kind of trick you can possibly do. So I destroyed this footage and made the same performance for him straight in front of the camera.

MB: Recently artists like Trisha Donnelly and Tino Sehgal have worked with performance and not allowed any documentation. How people tell each other about the performance possibly becomes more interesting than the visual documentation could ever be.

MA: With performance the narrative element is stronger than anything else. For example, I heard in Yugoslavia that the Volkswagen that Chris Burden was nailed to was driven around Los Angeles until the police stopped him. But actually it was just three people in a garage – they opened the door, pushed the car out, took a photograph and pushed it back.

JH: Perhaps this is why Burden felt that a re-enactment of his piece would destroy that piece's legendary status?

MA: Maybe. I don't get it.

MB: This reminds me of one of my favourite works – Gordon Matta-Clark's 1976 piece *Window Blowout*, where he walked into the Institute for Architecture and Urban Studies and blew out the windows with an airgun. It is pieces like this that give people of my generation the idea that in the 1960s and '70s you could do anything you wanted, but I guess this is a distortion. It makes me think of Bruce Nauman's first solo show at Leo Castelli gallery in 1968: the hang was surprisingly classical, conventional.

MA: There were so many bad performances in those days I was ashamed to describe myself as a performance artist. It was like, if you piss against a tree, it's a performance. At the end of the 1970s, though, all the bad performance artists became bad painters, which was great.

MB: You didn't have a gallery for a long time, did you?

MA: I've been with Sean Kelly in New York now for ten years, but I didn't have a gallery at all before that, even though I was approached many times. I lived for almost five years in a car, and went to deserts, stayed with Aborigines in Australia, and with Tibetan monks.

JH: How did you finance your life as an artist?

MA: I lived with my family in Yugoslavia until I was 29. I had to finish my performances before ten in the evening, because my mother forbade me to leave the house after that – I had a military regime at home. When I was a child, if my bed was messy when I was asleep, my mother would wake me up and tell me to sleep more neatly. So finally I escaped to Amsterdam. My mother went to the police and announced my disappearance, but when they asked how old I was and she said 29, they replied, 'well, it's about time'. Then I met Ulay – we were born on the same day and met on our birthday – it was a very crazy, romantic thing. All I had arrived in Amsterdam with was negatives of my performances – I didn't even have any clothes. We bought an old Citroën from the French police and lived in it from 1975 to '79. We lived in Sardinia and would wake up at dawn to milk the cows and the sheep and make pecorino cheese with the shepherds.

MB: You were a hippie.

MA: No, just two artists without money. And they fed us, and then we sat in the fields until we were asked to perform somewhere. In 1977 we were invited to a performance festival in Bologna. They promised to pay us what is today about 125 Euro, but we felt that if they hadn't paid us before the performance they would never pay. We arrived penniless with our last drop of petrol. On the day of our performance the audience was waiting outside the museum and Ulay went to the office, completely naked, and asked for our money. The secretary was so shocked she gave it to him, but he didn't have anywhere to put it. So he found a plastic bag, put the money inside, went to the toilet and put it in the cistern. We did the performance [Imponderabilia, 1977] facing each other naked for 90 minutes in the museum entrance, hoping that nobody would flush the toilet – at the end, thankfully, it was still there. It was only after our performance walk along the Great Wall of China [The Lovers, 1988] – which marked our separation – that I decided I needed a gallery. My friends said the only person who would understand the work was Sean Kelly, but he was working at the LA Louver gallery. It took me three years to organize a 'spontaneous' lunch with him. A friend of mine, Juliao Sarmiento, was meeting him at Dean & DeLuca, and we planned that I would pass by when they were eating. I was invited to sit down, and Sean finally said to me, 'I would really love to work with you, but it's the wrong time – today I lost my job and I have no gallery'. But we started working out of his loft, and then he opened a small gallery in New York on Mercer Street, and now he has a gallery in Chelsea.

JH: Everyone says the art world has become much more commercialized, but in one respect it really hasn't changed at all: if you are in the film or book industry, it's perfectly normal to approach a company to pitch an idea, and if it's successful a contract is signed. In the art world it's as if the artist is a Sleeping Beauty waiting to be discovered by the dealer or curator.

MB: What has changed is that the time span between studying and entering a gallery is getting shorter, but careers seem briefer too – some artists are lucky if theirs lasts for five years, and even luckier if they get a professorship.

MA: I always thought that nobody needs artists, which is precisely why you have to make yourself indispensable, so they can't live without you. It's not only important to make good work – it's important that you put it in the right place at the right time. So many good artists don't have the energy to do all this other shit because they are not communicative. I spend 20% of my time on creativity and 80% looking for ways of financing it.

JH: Your recent film *Balkan Erotic Epic* [2005] must have been quite something to organize: it involves numerous amateur actors performing sexual acts in folklore costumes. It's hilarious – like a parody of the Shirin Neshat representations of cultures and gender.

MA: Neville Wakefield approached me and several other artists about two years ago to make a 12-minute film for a DVD compilation he's putting together of contributions by artists who are working with erotic or pornographic elements in their work. I thought, the most interesting thing would be to think about my roots and how sexual organs are used traditionally in my culture, in the Balkan region.

MB: Thinking about your origins when it comes to porn – that's psychologically interesting.

MA: In socialist Yugoslavia everything was about sex, drinking and politics, and I wanted to explore where this came from. I did a lot of research and came across ancient pagan rituals where sexual organs are used for various purposes. For example, in the old days a mother would protect her child from the Evil Eye by rubbing the child's face with vaginal fluid. Or if a woman was having a difficult birth, her husband would take his penis out and make a cross on her breast; in the field, if a horse became weak, the man would touch it with his penis too; if there was a battle, the Balkan men would take the sexiest woman from the village, undress her and force her to perform obscene gestures to distract the enemy; alternatively, the soldiers would masturbate in the earth. There are hundreds of examples, all described in a very ancient Serbian language. One I thought was fantastic was that, if there was too much rain, the women from the village would run into the fields and lift their skirts and flash their pussies to the gods to scare them. So I went to Yugoslavia and talked to perfectly ordinary women from the village, between the ages of 18 and 75, into doing it. At first they were very shy and wouldn't do it, and I thought I wouldn't get anywhere. But after a while they ran into the mud and started showing their pussies like there was no tomorrow.

For another scene I asked men to be dressed in national costumes, and to unzip their trousers and reveal their erections; I asked them to stand very proud and look at the camera and not move. We shot 15 hours of that material. I don't think it's pornographic – anyone who sees this material bursts out laughing, but then looks at it for a long time, in silence. But at the same time there is something I can't explain: the power of our genitals, and how we can use them for healing or against the forces of nature. But obviously even for this kind of film I can't rub my vaginal liquid on the face of a three-year-old kid – I'd be put in prison. So I had a good solution – I made a cartoon out of this.

MB: Did you make the drawings for it yourself?

MA: No, I asked a Serbian cartoonist to do it. In the film these drawings will be shown by me, dressed as a stern teacher.

MB: So you're skipping the whole notion of sexuality as a sociological site of power and politics.

MA: But it's amazing when you see a 75-year-old woman showing her pussy in the rain. I don't even know what this material means; I'm really touched by it.

MB: But isn't it a bit like a fairy-tale? You don't really believe that flashing will stop the rain, do you?

MA: Can the gods be scared? Of a 75-year-old pussy, maybe they can. But we should return to what we discussed in regard to using actors. It would be very different if I did this performance. This 75-year-old woman was a pensioner who worked in the post office, and this was one of the most exciting things she had ever done – she got so enthusiastic. And that comes across.

MB: Do you see this film as a reappropriation of pre-modern, 'primitive' sexuality, a power that doesn't exist any more? Because now we are living in a strip-tease culture, where you are expected to be sexy as a woman, but it doesn't even mean having free sex. You just have to be available, on display.

MA: Do I think an Italian weather girl on TV who looks like a porn star is healing somebody? No. But in regard to my film material, I don't know yet what it means. Monica, do you ever get obsessed with an idea and know you have to do it, but you don't know why? And then all of a sudden it seems so logical. That has happened to me so many times.

MB: Sam Durant once said to me that making art is a bit like keeping a diary, because at a certain point you develop your own language, so the next work inevitably relates to the one before. Even if you don't know why, there is continuity.

MA: I've had problems with continuity. There have been periods in my life where I had absolutely no ideas and I would panic, but didn't want to force it intellectually.

MB: I really love *Waiting for an Idea* [1991]; 'what am I going to do next?' is such a recurrent feeling for an artist.

MA: Nowadays I don't care, because after working for 30 years I know I can't force it. But when the idea comes, I get really afraid, although there's an incredible feeling of relief after it's realized. One thing I hate is when people come up to me after a performance and want to engage in a deep conversation when all I want to do is have an ice-cream and do nothing.

MB: But some of your performances are very heavy, even moral. For example, your performance in Basel – you were crying for hours.

MA: For me the public is a holy thing.

MB: How do you see performance developing in the future?

MA: I think that performance is very strange – it comes and goes. It was all over the place in the 1970s, but there was too much crap; then in the 1980s it was all about the self and the market, with the exception of the night-club scene and artists like Leigh Bowery – it was all connected to music and AIDS and the awareness of the body. In the 1990s many performances became an element in video installations, and there were lots of performance elements in contemporary dance – people like Jan Fabre, Pina Bausch, Jérôme Bel. Now I find it very interesting that a performance piece doesn't have to be performed by the artist who created it. Any artist who has the courage to do a performance without documenting it is the most radical. But I can't help it – I document all my performances, because my mother is such an orderly woman – I believe in KGB files. But in an ideal world, it should be just word of mouth.

Marina Abramović's series of performances 'Seven Easy Pieces' will take place 9 – 15 November at the Guggenheim Museum, New York and followed by a solo show at Sean Kelly Gallery from 9 December. Her exhibition 'Balkan Epic' will be held at Art for the World Project for Pirelli, Milan, from 19 January – 30 March 2006.

Monica Bonvicini is shortlisted for the Nationalgalerie Prize for Young Art 2005, on show at Hamburger Bahnhof, Berlin, until 16 October. Her work is included in the Venice and Gothenburg Biennales (both until 6 November), and in 'Centre of Gravity', the inaugural exhibition of the Istanbul Modern museum.