

The Free Totalitarian Zone: Marina Abramovic Presents....

Provocations, musings and questions

by Lorena Rivero de Beer and Lena Simic

This review of 'Marina Abramovic Presents...' is primarily a critique of contemporary performance culture rather than the artists' work. The piece was written after and through a series of conversations between Lorena Rivero de Beer and Lena Simic on the event.

'Marina Abramovic Presents...' was a four-hour long durational performance lasting over a period on seventeen days, from 3rd to 19th July 2009, at Whitworth Art Gallery in Manchester as a part of Manchester International Festival. The performance featured Marina Abramovic with thirteen other performers: Ivan Civic, Nikhil Chopra, Amanda Coogan, Marie Cool Fabio Balducci, Yingmei Duan, Eunhye Hwang, Jamie Isenstein, Terence Koh, Alastair MacLennan, Kira O'Reilly, Fedor Pavlov-Andreevich, Melati Suryodarmo and Nico Vascellari. In the short video clip which is available on the official festival website, Abramovic invited the audiences to stay with the artists for the whole duration of the piece, four hours in total. She encourages the audiences to slow down and really take in the artists' work, and thus, for a while, change their perceptions of the world. The official festival website describes the event:

For this groundbreaking event, the Whitworth will empty every gallery space in order to create room for this unique work to develop and breathe. The show begins with an hour-long performance initiation with Marina Abramovic, leading up to a series of extraordinary encounters between artists and audience. Quite unlike anything staged before in the UK, this will be a provocative and visceral experience. (<http://www.mif.co.uk/events/marina-abramovi-presents%e2%80%a6/>)

The event was placed within the framework of the Manchester International Festival, which as described on the official website names itself as 'the world's first international festival of original, new work and special events'. It is important to keep that in mind whilst reading this deliberately provocative and performative review that deals in a series of open-ended questions. As performance practitioners, critical thinkers, pedagogues and residents in the North West, we feel compelled to offer our own thoughts and specific voice on an unfolding performance context. We decided to ask questions and be critical, after all, we thought to ourselves, we are all responsible for the production of our own culture, we mustn't leave it solely to those internationally renowned artists.

We, Lorena Rivero de Beer and Lena Simic, performance practitioners and budding academics, spent Sunday, the 12th of July 2009 at Whitworth Gallery in Manchester. We attended a Symposium 'returns only' from 11am-1pm and then the durational performance 'Marina Abramovic presents...' from 2pm-6pm. Adrian Heathfield and Amelia Jones were keynotes at the Symposium. Maria Balshaw, the curator at the Whitworth, and Hans Ulrich Obrist, co-director at the Serpentine Gallery, were there as well. The national Live Art crowd came to Manchester, with many familiar faces, producers, artists, academics. We came from Liverpool. Train ride took 45 minutes. We all came to get a glimpse of Marina Abramovic, meet the legend in the flesh...

Fast Forward 1 – on the train back to Liverpool

Leaving the Withworth Art Gallery we discussed the contradictory feelings and thoughts we were having about the process we went through during the day. While agreeing that it had been an intense intellectual and aesthetic experience we also felt that there was something awkward and oppressive about it which we were eager to name and debate. We were concerned about the way the women in the durational performances choose to use their bodies and their sexuality and we felt that there was something symptomatic on our concern that reflected on the nature of the whole event. While the great majority of both male and female bodies represented in the different performances were highly sexualized (most of the performances directly assessed the issues of fantasy and desire) we felt uncomfortable with the very different way the issue was tackled by the female and male artists. While the male performers (Ivan Civic, Nikhil Chopra, Terence Koh, Alastair MacLennan, Fedor Pavlov-Andreevich and Nico Vascellari) used sexuality as a strategy to engage the spectator, to bring the spectator to a position in which they could become involved with other issues, most of the female representation did not allow the spectator to

move beyond the issue of desire itself.¹ So, for us, on our train ride back to Liverpool, the question was, why did four out of the seven female performers (Amanda Coogan, Yingmei Duan, Kira O'Reilly and Metali Suryodarmo) decide to represent the female body as an object of desire? This opened for us a series of further questions: Are artists in question citing the risks of being objectified at the same time as they are reproducing objectification? Or, is there a certain intellectual laziness underlying women artists' use of their body under parameters that reproduce forms of representation that look at women as mainly submissive objects of desire? And if not, where does the benefit lie in reproducing such forms without essentially subverting them?

Rewind 1 – getting beyond troubled female naked bodies and art history

To put it another way, three of the women are naked and we are there to look at them (Amanda Coogan, Yingmei Duan, Kira O'Reilly). How can we, as emancipated and trained audiences, who have gone through Abramovic's drill, avoid the limiting notions of seeing these naked female bodies as objects of desire – how can we move further beyond the position of reading these three naked female bodies through our late consumer capitalist eyes?

Coogan is climbing a flight of stairs and throwing herself onto a large mattress repeatedly. As she is performing her action, she is not in touch with us, the spectators, her gaze is fixed elsewhere. She is a blond woman in her thirties wearing a seductive low cleavage yellow dress. Through the repetitive action her dress does not keep in place and reveals her breasts. Coogan plays with the imagery of glamour, sexuality and desire. At times she

¹ The exceptions being Eunhye Hwang, in whose piece her playful use of desire was transformed into a bigger question of human need and issues of intersubjectivity, and Jamie Isenstein that used the notion of desire to think of history and civilization. The remaining female performer was Marie Cool Fabio Balducci, who did not address the issue of desire in any obvious form.

sticks her tongue out, she screams and produces strange noises. Could these moments be read as subversion; is she able to get out of the glamorous/not glamorous binary reading that Vogue and other high fashion magazines provide? She seems to be transmitting to us the cyclical and polarised nature of the narratives produced by female representations under a patriarchal and consumerist culture. If we extrapolate this further we could read that she is conveying to us how our ability to express ourselves and develop our subjectivity as women is limited by the enveloping nature of those discourses. Is Coogan's repetitive action an act of sacrifice of herself as a woman performer, in order to emancipate us, women spectators? Are we moved by the gesture?

O'Reilly's beautifully controlled movement, as she was falling down the stairs, was creating images that made us think of classical and contemporary representations of the female body (from Velazquez or Egon Schiele to Cindy Sherman). Her use of black gloves as her only piece of clothing made us think of masochistic or fetishized action that seemed to reference the history of art and representation of the female body. We are captured by her falling naked body, by the liveness of the event, by the now, a naked woman slowly falling down the stairs in the context of an art gallery. We wondered, what exposures were in place beyond the visceral physical?

Duan is in a state of constant craving, moving naked, slowly and quietly amongst the audiences. It seems that she aims to create an alternative subtle representation that encourages us to get into contact with a deeper subjectivity, but somehow her effort does not seem to work in the overall context. Stuck in the space in between Coogan and O'Reilly she is read in relation to them, and therefore in comparison to them, she fails to capture us; we can't help but read her efforts as futile: 'she simply doesn't do much or enough'. She is not giving us enough jumping, screaming, exercising, exposing, swinging.

What happened to us, the audiences, that we are stuck in that reading? Why can't we access the piece and enjoy its potential complexity?

Our questions become more focused: can these performance pieces be categorized as feminist, or on the contrary, do they reinforce women's submission through a sort of abuse of critical feminist positions? And how does this question link with the way the pieces are engaging with the gallery context?

Rewind 2 – talking in Lena's office at Liverpool Hope University in the aftermath of the event

In an effort to untangle the nature of such questions we had to think about the nature of the event and what it demanded from the spectator. That is, the complex relationship established between the Whitworth Art Gallery, the figure of Marina Abramovic and the performers themselves. The event, curated by the Whitworth Art Gallery and Abramovic, was introduced to us during the Symposium as an experience that strives to be equally challenging for both spectators and performers. For the performance, they dressed all of us in white overcoats, reminiscent of scientific laboratory workers. We were there to examine and explore. Abramovic orchestrated our experience before hand, so that we perceive the performances in a specific 'performative' way. During the so called hour long 'drill' Abramovic introduced us to a series of meditative, physical and relational exercises: we drank a cup of water over a period of ten minutes, got into pairs and looked into each others eyes, took each other's body weight on our back and at the end we walked as a group across the space in slow motion. These exercises served to prepare us for the experience of encountering the durational performances. This kind of preparation of the audiences might seem careful, ritualistic and thoughtful to those members of audiences

who had not previously encountered such workshop techniques, however, they left us cold as they were done in a room with more than 150 people. Our overall feeling was that Abramovic took a totalitarian or dictatorial position with the aim of empowering us in our role as spectators. We were reminded of an activist dictum we'd recently heard: Power can only ever be taken, never given.

Fast Forward 2 – Lorena's email

If we think in terms of power and collective authorship in arts practice, what does Abramovic's preparation of the spectator tell us? How does it challenge our reading of the performances? The pedagogical approach Abramovic took prepared us to see the performances could be read as an attempt to increase the understanding of a specific form of representation and as such is a progressive action that attempts to create a socially inclusive form of spectatorship. But also it could be read as a dictatorial attempt to control our responses and diminish potential critique. Is Abramovic instrumentalising the knowledge of intersubjectivity developed by radical performance for marketing purposes? Or putting it even more gloomily: what if the whole event reproduces the worst aspects of the narcissism we suffer in the capitalist society while at the same time uses our desperate need for more meaningful encounters as its primary matter?

For the sake of the argument let's assume that the intention of the event was to empower us or that at some level the event achieves that. If we go back to the issue of female representation, when a piece brings us (or traps us) in a position in which we cannot think beyond the female body as an object of desire, is it trying to represent the emptiness that certain forms of representation convey? And is it assuming that the drill by Abramovic would have created a state of greater emotional awareness, one that might enable us to

acquire some critical distance from what we actually experience during the performances? That is, are we supposed to understand the nature of the seductive feelings the pieces generate, place them into an appropriate context and understand their oppressive implications? That would indeed be asking a lot, but one can see the potential through which it could lead us to a more considered understanding of the links between representation and human subjectivity.

Pause: duration

In order to understand the character of the women's representations, we shall move to another important question: curator, symposium panelists and the artist's insistence on contextualizing this important event, including the different durational performances within it, as a radical episode of the Western history of art. Of course it is no coincidence that Abramovic's next project is a foundation for the Institute for Preservation of Performance Art. This would clearly include the concept of re-enactments, which Jones discussed in her keynote paper, including Abramovic's *Seven Easy Pieces* (MoMA 2005). Re-enactments create and re-affirm canons and canonical thought whilst at the same time preserving the liveness and referencing the duration of the original performances. The 13 performances that were part of 'Marina Abramovic presents...' all had a durational quality, which Abramovic was keen to acknowledge during the symposium. While we understand that one of the merits of live performance might be its tendency to let go of objects as commodities, we did not understand what was so good about a 'durational' aspect of performance. It seemed to be suggested that duration is good in and of itself. Amelia Jones made an important point during the symposium, noting that re-enactments of radical historical performance pieces in the well known museums have repositioned objects and documentation in front of the liveness and impermanence. The radical has moved into the

museum and transformed itself into a coffee-table book. Performance practice which has often insisted on being anti-commodification has self consciously positioned itself right in the heart of the culture industry in North West, UK.

Is there a need for creating 'reservations', 'safe zones', 'preservations' of radical thought and performance? Have we reached the state where art should only reference life and not embody it? Have we managed to institutionalize dissent? Have we curated risk? Have we reached the point where performance needs preservation – re-enactment – self-assurance? Or, is this an exercise in ensuring that there is an important continuation of performance art history? From that standpoint, what is the purpose of the event and this form of performance, is it a self-referential practice? And if so, why should we care? But we're afraid that if we follow this line of thought we'll arrive at a dead end.

But the thing that makes us really squirm is the link this line of thinking has with what was said at the Symposium before the performances. It was implied that the event was driven by the need to market success in performance art and its histories in order to guarantee audiences. This was clear from two things. Firstly, the gallery marketing strategies and their use of Abramovic's name and image for the poster – to the extent that the other artists were secondary or even periphery; and secondly, how that affected the language and meaning of the performances we experienced. One of the first things that came out when we embarked upon our conversations was the question of the title of the event, Marina Abramovic Presents..., and the extent to which it responds to a vocabulary associated with the logics of the market. The word 'presents' within the title seems to have been conjured up without irony, neither Abramovic nor other panelists in the Symposium appeared to be questioning just how it happened that 'radical contemporary performance makers and thinkers' use the same expressions as Hollywood films. During the

symposium it was acknowledged that the organizers decided to use Marina's name as a marketing strategy. We wonder to what extent a particular kind of vocabulary reflects a structural form of thinking? In addition to 'presents...', other words and expressions like 'invest', 'live art sector', 'getting famous', 'being noticed by important international curators' have also sneaked into radical contemporary performance practices and contexts. Abramovic herself has acknowledged her desire to function as a curator and a connector for her gifted students (2006).² We believe that role of the radical educator is first and foremost to expose the students to critical thinking through an arts practice and its associated theories not primarily to present themselves as agents for a younger, gifted generation. We are wondering to what extent can we, as performance practitioners and pedagogues, claim autonomy and defy the capitalist machine?

Play, finally

Here comes a response: Nico Vascellari is bringing the place down, with a brick, through repetitive movements and a soundscape reminiscent of church bells. The sound spreads through the gallery space, beyond gallery walls, outside. The gallery is bursting with sound: it's calling the outsiders in. We meet a cyclist outside the gallery who heard the banging and asked us what was going inside? We told him that we were not sure if he would be allowed in, but that durational performances were taking place inside the gallery. Whether he made it into the gallery or not, we don't know but he was called in by the banging: he was intrigued. Art crossed a barrier, the outsiders were called in.

² See 'PURE RAW Performance, Pedagogy, and (Re)presentation' Marina Abramovic; interviewed by Chris Thompson and Katarina Weslien in PAJ 82 (2006), pp. 29–50.

Record

We need to question the gallery's function in this event. The gallery had emptied its walls of its artistic objects and instead had them occupied by bodies in durational performances. By its own admission this was an attempt self-radicalisation. By emptying its gallery collection, the Whitworth Art Gallery had committed, in the words of its curator Maria Balshaw, a radical act. So, what was radical? Was the content of artists' work radical? Did Abramovic's drill to prepare the audiences produce a radical form of spectatorship and criticism?

Finally, and perhaps most worryingly, is there a connection between the way the women performers dealt with (or failed to deal with) their own representation as women and Abramovic's business of popularizing performance art? For all the fascination we felt with O'Reilly's movement, Duan's appeal to an intimate subjectivity or Coogan's gallant effort to explore the polarized nature of female representations, our gut reaction, which still lingers, was of alienation. So, going back to the question of our role as spectators, does the nature of the event demand that we construct ourselves a critique through distancing ourselves from the event and analyzing our own feelings of alienation? Are we really being asked to do that? Can we realistically do that? We felt that the intensity and seductiveness of the experience made it difficult to transform or rethink the feeling of alienation, which was reinforced by the mode of spectatorship we had been induced into. In other words we were asked to properly digest, tolerate and ultimately accept whatever we saw. We are now left with the worry that women's positions cannot move beyond, at best, rehearsals of the problematic of women's representation whilst they are housed within the structure of an art institution. We wonder if we, as women, are empowered by the gesture to popularize performance art in this way. The Whitworth, as with most galleries, designed

and maintained as they are by the ubiquitous white, privileged male with cultural capital, continues to deliver on its reactionary remit despite its probably genuine attempt at radicalism. Despite the best intentions of the performers, that afternoon in the gallery felt too much like a market driven playground for self-critical, alternative ritual. Abramovic, along with the others, seemed eager to lay claim to mainstream cultural space, that's something to applaud but, we have to ask, at what cost?

References

Manchester International Festival <http://www.mif.co.uk/events/marina-abramovi-presents%e2%80%a6/>

Abramovic, Marina, Chris, Thompson and Katarina, Weslien(2006) 'PURE RAW Performance, Pedagogy, and (Re)presentation' in PAJ 82, pp. 29–50