



**Agôn**

Revue des arts de la scène

**6 | 2013**  
**La Reprise**

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## The artist is present in the bodies of many: Reperforming Marina Abramović

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**Electronic version**

URL: <http://journals.openedition.org/agon/2739>

DOI: 10.4000/agon.2739

ISSN: 1961-8581

**Publisher**

Association Agôn

**Electronic reference**

Carrie Stern, « The artist is present in the bodies of many: Reperforming Marina Abramović », *Agôn* [Online], 6 | 2013, Online since 23 February 2014, connection on 19 April 2019. URL : <http://journals.openedition.org/agon/2739> ; DOI : 10.4000/agon.2739

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This text was automatically generated on 19 April 2019.

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# The artist is present in the bodies of many: Reperforming Marina Abramović

Carrie Stern

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*I profoundly thank the reperformers for sharing such a deeply felt experience. Their thoughtfulness, forthrightness, and generosity of spirit were a gift. I especially thank Jeramy Zimmerman for introducing me to the reperformers, for passes to MoMA, for her friendship. I want to thank Daniela Stigh and Margaret Doyle from MoMA's Department of Communication for their help.*

“What made me embark on this quest? (Jill asked so I’m answering.)” I had not come to MoMA to see *The Artist is Present*, which was not yet the cultural phenomenon it would become. This is what grabbed me – “REPERFORMANCE AS A MEANS OF INVESTIGATING AND PRESERVING PERFORMANCE ART<sup>1</sup>.” ”

- 1 Sixty-three at the time of the MoMA exhibition, Marina Abramović has been leading up to “reperformance”, since moving to New York City in 2001. In interviews with art historian Janet Kaplan (1999/*Art Journal*), before the term “reperformance” appears, with Chris Thompson and Katarina Weslien (2006/*PAJ*), and in *The Observer* (2010), among others, Abramović expressed her ideas about preservation and her concerns about the future of historic performance art. “If works of performance art are never seen after their initial staging, they just die. ‘Many of my colleagues never give permission to re-perform their work because they think it will be changed, and will not be their own work,’” she told *The Observer*. “But I really have a different opinion. Even it’s (sic) changed...still it’s better that it is re-performed in that changed form than not performed at all and become just kind of dead material in books and bad video recordings. I really believe that we have to give this kind of new life to performance.” Abramović tested her ideas first on her own body in

*Seven Easy Pieces* (2005), a “re-staging” of iconic work by six artists, as well as one of her own, at the Guggenheim Museum, and then on the bodies of others in *The Artist is Present*.

*The Artist is Present*



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- 2 My interest in preservation starts from my fascination with the in-fighting and maneuvering that ensued in the wake of the deaths of Erick Hawkins (1994) without a will, the Martha Graham (1991) post-death lawsuit, and the complications that followed the demise of other important choreographers of their generations over control of their work, including their techniques.
- 3 Though separated by at least two decades, many performance artists (and dancers) of the 1960s/1970s had similarly not provided for a future for their seminal work. As this generation matured in the 1980s, they began making repertory works or returned to product-oriented art. Even as idiosyncratic a choreographer as Trisha Brown codified her work, creating training and repertory that can be passed on and sold.
- 4 The early work of many in this generation was built on the artist’s specific body. Often designed for a particular place, to be fleeting—if such a thing can be said of those works that lasted anywhere from multiple hours to months—the go-for-broke ethos did not necessarily expect replication. A groundbreaking concept of late 1960s/early 1970s avant garde, asserted that the in-the-moment character of the performance, the search for experience, was paramount; that production was ephemeral, once mounted unlikely to be seen again.
- 5 Codification changes such performance removing an edge. Journalist Holland Cotter —“Two elements that originally defined performance art as a medium, unpredictability and ephemerality, were missing [at MoMA]...Without them you get misrepresented

history and bad theater.” And, in the big-institution event in which the MoMA reperformances occurred physical risk had to be minimized. Abramović reperformer Abigail Levine explains: —“The chance and risk of Marina’s early work was not there [in the MoMA show]. Risk of a certain kind had to be removed in this context, in [contracting] other bodies to do the work.” Yet reperformance—repetition, duration of another kind, new rules, settings, etc—brought new understandings, new types of development, while maintaining the work’s inherent surprise. These new understandings encompass a different idea of what it means for a work of performing art to continue to live. Choreographers often recreate their work. Like Monet’s many visions of haystacks, versions are created for new casts, costumes changed for dancers whose technique changes the “look” of the movement. Older arts – ballet, Kabuki – know that things cannot remain static; change is the essence of performance. But performance art – with its odd blend of visual art aesthetics and the performing body is just beginning to ask what it means to preserve that which is inherently unpreservable in the way that, say, a painting is. Thus the concept of reperformance, whether the artist chooses to allow other bodies to inhabit the work or consign it to “bad video recordings” is crucial to the future of many types of performance.

- 6 Abramović has thought about “passing on” since the 1990s. “A hundred years after Mozart’s death,” she told art historian Janet Kaplan, “you can have your own interpretation of Mozart, but you still say it’s by Mozart. In that way, I think a performance should be open like music. There’s a structure of the performance that you can see and then you make your own interpretation and have your own experience. You absolutely have to respect the originality of the piece,” and ask permission from a living artist, she adds. “You can do whatever you want after that.” Each reperformance, therefore, depending on the place, the body of the performer, their instincts and choices, will unavoidably diverge from the original. Abramović considers previous performances – hers and others – “original material,” evidence available for re-creation, for staging, which she later terms re-enacting and eventually reperformance. “The moment you create the work,” she told Kaplan, “it’s not yours anymore. It’s not your property.” “It can no longer be the same,” reperformer Levine told me, “there is nothing sacred about the original. They have to be strong enough [to work] in this new context; some [MoMA reperformances] worked more than others, or worked in different ways.”
- 7 Where “ownership claims” in modern dance often insist on a single “correct” interpretation, Abramović, according to several reperformers, only asks for an adherence to a structure, to timing, to the spirit of the work. Without ever saying there is a “right way,” she claims an essence for her work that is immutable. To me, this approach allows for the inevitable change over time in what the body of the originator, and of future performers, know; an understanding that interpretation is unavoidable as each person who performs a work imbues it with their self. Tamsin Nutter, a writer and former dancer who works in MoMA’s marketing department, wrote in the museums blog; “Abramović has said that her own body is the subject, object, and medium of her artwork. In a reperformance, it follows that the medium, at least, has changed; like a choreographer using dancers, she has expanded her tools and materials to include other people. Marina Abramović is present everywhere in this exhibition, both in body and spirit, but she’s not the only one. The reperformers—bodies, minds, artists—are fully, go-for-broke present too.”

- 8 From July 2010 to July 2011, I interviewed six reperformers from Abramović's MoMA retrospective spending over an hour with each. Conversation ranged widely focusing on their experience, addressing differences between reperformance and original performance, the impact of their experience on their personal lives, the museum as a site for live performance including labor issues. As an aspect of the performance experience audience reaction and reception is addressed and the remarkable role of the museum guards during the three-month event. Questions were not always directly answered instead acting as prompts. For coherence I have reordered, condensed, and extracted hoping to allow six separate interviews to talk to each other. The performers were given the opportunity to preview the finished edit assuring their ideas were not misrepresented.
- 9 This article is divided into two large categories – *Preserving* and *Investigating*. Divisions within *Preserving* include: type and training of reperformers and their understanding of their relationship to the original work, including the durational experience. *Investigation* addresses a wide range of concerns relating to interpretation – in general and of individual works, moving from reperformance to performance, the artist's sense of presence, and engagement between performers.

## The reperformers in the order interviewed

Following the first reference in the text only initials will be used.

Deborah Wing-Sproul (D.W-S) Deborah Wing-Sproul is a multi-disciplinary artist working primarily in video and performance. She is an Assistant Professor at the Maine College of Art and University of Maine. A mother of 3, she commuted for the duration of the show. (7/21/2010).

Jeremy Zimmerman (J.Z.) is a choreographer and performer. She is the founder of FLICfest (Feature Length Independent Choreography) and Cat Scratch Theater. (9/13/2010).

Jill Sigman (J.S.) is a choreographer and performer. Her "Hut Project" blends environmental concerns with performance. (12/15/2010).

Gary Lai (G.L.) sometimes performs and sometimes does, or teaches, gymnastics, martial arts, dance, yoga, and rock-climbing. (5/9/2011).

Abigail Levine (A.L.) is a dance and performance artist. She has a Masters in Dance and Performance Studies from NYU. (6/6/2011).

Layard Thompson (L.T.) is a choreographer and performance artist. He lives at Sassafras, an artist-owned and operated community space in rural Tennessee. (7/24/2011).

## The works

1. *Imponderabilia* - Two nude performers face each other on either side of a doorway. Viewers enter the exhibit between their bodies (1977).
2. *Point of Contact* - Two performers, dressed in black, loose fitting suits and white shirts, stand still and silent one finger pointing towards the other, nearly touching (1980).
3. *Relation In Time* - Two performers sit silently back-to-back in white shirts their long hair twined together into a single bun (1977).
4. *Nude With Skeleton* - The performer lies nearly still under a real skeleton (2005).

5. *Luminosity* - Nude female performers sit on a bicycle seat mounted high on the gallery wall; a ladder reaches the seat, pedals allow minute changes (1997).

## Preserving

The reperformers discuss their understanding of how to perpetuate performance art and the reperformer's role in that continuity.

Deborah WING-SPROUL. One of Marina's stated objectives for this exhibit was to set down groundwork for preserving performance art. One of the divisive issues is whether or not original works of performance can, or should be, performed again. Marina thinks yes. To me there is no argument. If the maker wants them to be they should be reperformed. [But] if it's to only be done once, that's what the work is. One way or the other, hopefully there is enough understanding of an artist's intentions after their death so their wishes can be honored. She's thinking about her legacy and she's laying out instructions - "if you do this, here's how. Here's the liberties you can take and here's what you can't take." Marina had a film crew following her. She had them shoot one-hour takes of each of the pieces. She chose one or two performers for her archives. So my whole feeling about re-performing Marina's work is that I wanted to know as much as possible about her intentions so I could carry them out without miming her, so I could take her intent with my own authority. Both would be live performances of the work. And I think that whether or not people liked the exhibit or agreed with it, I think she made a huge step forward in terms of preserving performance art and pointing to some of the problems inherent in preserving performance.

Abigail LEVINE. What Marina created with the show goes far beyond putting up a good display for museum visitors - the training over a course of a year or a year-and-a-half of hand selected artists, the very real question of how museums function, and that includes asking questions about the relationship of patrons, guards, board of trustees.

Gary LAI. As one of the reperformers I think I played a role [in preservation,] but I don't think it's my responsibility [to preserve the work,] nor is it one I want, but I'm open to it if that's what my part of it ended up doing.

Jeremy ZIMMERMAN. I think that we are all a living document now, but [our future role] is a huge question. We are documents of the work, and in other ways [the work] is different now that we've done it. But it's not like the Jerome Robbins Foundation, I'm not ordained to go set Marina's work on some small market museum. I think that we're a resource.

The last weekend of our show some young performance artists got together and did some of the work we were doing calling it "The Artist Is Absent". They [reperformed] *Rhythm 10*, the one with the knife. My understanding is that Marina is fine with people reperforming her work, but not the work they can harm themselves with. I think they missed the mark with what the work is about, it became cheeky, but at the same time they had a right to do it if the instructions are simple. You can only copy-write the title. Part of me feels like now it's my duty [to] speak out, not spoil the piece. Being open to talking about the experience is one way of preserving it.

## Training

A “training workshop” was held at the Marina Abramović Institute, her home in Hudson, New York. The workshop was designed to instill concepts informing the work, sensitivity towards it, develop the stamina needed for durational work, and build community. For a variety of reasons some participants in the training did not appear in the exhibition, some who did were hired at a later time.

A.L. Our training was about turning inward towards experience, slowing down, finding your strength, your resources for completing the performances. During the training workshop Abramović never made an explicit connection between the work and the workshop. “We Cleaned The House;” that’s the name of her workshop. Instructions were provided, and they were very ridged—count these lentils and rice for an hour, separate by color, count, keep track—there was never a sense of “this is for this,” or “you’ll get tired and frustrated and then you’ll...”[I don’t know] whether it was instinctual that she didn’t say, “now take that and use as a lesson for this.

J.Z. Marina is very clear, you can’t rehearse this work, that’s not what it’s about, but you have to train your body and mind to withstand the demands of the work.

G.L. I missed bonding with Marina and the others, but I felt that I got a chance to do the piece(s) on my own, [to be] this reperformer doing the piece rather than someone coached to a certain aspect [of the work] in terms of the exercise and so on. [My experience] may have been truer to Marina’s ideas of preparing for the piece.

“What were Marina’s instructions to you?”

By all accounts Abramović’ does not believe in rehearsal as such and instruction is minimal. The training, “Cleaning The House,” is enough. Performance, for Abramović, is primarily about interpretation of the structure. Some performers perceived a gap between Abramović’s “vision” and, if her instructions were strictly followed, “practicality.” I have placed instructions under “presence,” but while following instructions interpretation begins.

L.T. I was surprised by how little instruction there was. Instructions were transmitted through doing; I felt rewarded by the latitude for performers to figure things out on their own.

Jill SIGMAN. For *Luminosity* they were, “lift your arms slowly, stop anywhere, and stay as long as you can.” I had a lot of questions about what that meant. She answered some of them. Some people didn’t hear the answers. It was very loose. I didn’t want more instructions... As dancers you want to execute the work of the director. Marina is a performance artist not a director, not a theater person. She thinks [in terms of] a set of rules and situations, not choreographic directions. She doesn’t have as fine grained a sense of movement as a dancer does. Lift your arms means only one thing to her. To a dancer it means 100 things.

J.Z. We got the set up of the pieces – *Point Of Contact* – facing each other with fingers almost touching but never touch; *Relation In Time*—back to back with ponytails tied; during *Luminosity* we were to remain symmetrical...

G.L. There was no initial discussion. We had what they called rehearsals, but it was like a run-through—how people would stand in *Imponderabilia*; how it would be with people walking through; how to sit on the bicycle seat; getting used to the space. We used the time to go through logistics, chat; she said, “When you do it you understand it.” I heard

she was upstairs every morning to check on things and make sure it was exactly the same, but there was no instruction.

D.W-S. One of Marina's general comments about performing this work is, you find small incremental ways of moving your body to release pain or increase circulation. Sometimes people would need to move a leg to release a cramp but in *Nude With Skeleton* the main thing is the breath. People did move some, but the focus is not on new body positions. Within a given performance I think her intent was to assume a position and commit to it more or less [in] relative stillness.

Marina Abramović, *Nude with Skeleton*



**NUDE WITH SKELETON (ORIGINALLY PERFORMED BY MARINA ABRAMOVIĆ, 2002/2005), AS REPERFORMED BY JERAMY ZIMMERMAN FORMARINA ABRAMOVIĆ: THE ARTIST IS PRESENT (2010), THE MUSEUM OF MODERN ART, NEW ORK. COURTESY MARINA ABRAMOVIĆ AND SEAN KELLY GALLERY.**

© 2010 Marina Abramović. Photo © 2010 The Museum of Modern Art, New York. Photo: Jonathan Muzikar

How did you understand your relationship to the original work? To Abramović?

This question is primary. As Klaus Biesenbach, MoMA's curator-at-large put it, "Marina seduces everyone!" While this is clearly true for the reperformers, they were also negotiating performing the works in a context unlike those Marina had performed the original version, particularly a different experience of duration. Their experience was also affected by their status as museum employees, a new category both for the museum and for performers more accustomed to short-term engagements. At first many tried to perform according to a "Marina template." Increasingly, however, they realized the need to perform her structures, but as themselves. The negotiation between wanting to maintain her essential work and their own interpretation is central to many reperformers' experience.

A.L. Our contact with Marina was in the intensity of our training. Then there was a long lag, and then dreaminess. Then there were meetings while galleries were being constructed, then two emails in first six weeks.

G.L. Physically each piece was different and challenging. Because [Abramović doesn't believe in rehearsal] I didn't even want to think about the piece, I just wanted to go in and have it be totally new to me. Some performers wanted to get together and discuss [the works] to make sure everyone didn't get used to doing the pieces [so] they'd become rote; to help us continue to stay focused. We never did that but we would



discuss it in the hall. We still discuss it when we get together; we never get tired of discussing it.

J.S. [There is] a sense of responsibility knowing you are performing someone else's work. It felt like a navigation that is fraught with questions – navigating the pieces, navigating my role as an interpreter of Marina's work. You're navigating a boundary between making it your own and doing [what was given to you.]

L.T. I was fine with being a creative performance artist who [developed] the intent in her work [with] latitude to bring the energy and thought that the performance required.

A.L. I think the MoMA experience brought reperformers challenges different than Marina's challenges—the distractability in a retrospective [with so much going on] is high; it would be interesting to perform any of these works in isolation and compare it to this performance. I looked at documentation of Marina performing; it wasn't for imitation so much as sort of observation, a version of completeness. In my estimation, in Marina's work it is the design of the structures that provides the possibility of an experience for an audience [so] Marina isn't the only one who can perform [the work.] There's this cult of personality that Performance Art is steeped in, it's hamstrung by the "who" of a performance. There is a wonderful potential in these reperformances to erase that and see anonymously whether there is an energetic possibility in the performances that is enough; or do you need to come to a show already invested in a person's performance?

D.W-S. I sometimes teach performance work, so I think I was one of the few performers steeped in Marina's work prior to performing it. I had seen her perform several pieces. For me, there was a question of Mariana performing her work, and [someone else] representing it...Marina brings her entire history and identity and body to the work. I think if she were to reperform her own work now [it would be different.] I can't be her body. I feel like when I enter these works I'm bringing all of whom I am. I feel that having witnessed her performing multiple times was helpful to me, a guide. That previous experience helped me reperform. When I saw her perform *Luminosity*...I still had my own skepticism, I needed to experience her energy in that work [before] any skepticism or doubt shifted. She had variation in her gaze, breath, a range of body positions. It was extremely powerful. One of [Marina's] early on comments about *Nude With Skeleton* was that you need to have your own relationship with the Skelton, that you need to engage with the skeleton in your own way...She didn't want us to look at photo and copy what she'd done, she wanted us to find a position where it felt personal, where we found our own way with the skeleton.

How did performing the duets in both same-sex and mixed-sex couples change the work from Abramović's original, mixed-sex duets?

J.Z. When Marina did the work it was [with] her partner and lover; only a few people [...] had that relationship with someone in the show. Sure, it was different to [perform *Imponderabilia*] with a man than a woman. It changed with every partner and even with the same partner sometimes.

J.S. I thought about this a lot. I don't know that it was different performing it (*Imponderabilia*) with another woman, but I was struck that I wasn't performing with my lover, [there was no] bond that preceded and extended beyond [the performative

moment]. Not that I didn't have a bond with the people I performed with, but I feel that because Marina and Ulay were connected they didn't need to stare [at each other; they could just be there together.

## Bodies

Jill Sigman raises another question; it is one that first peeked my interest in these performances. She asks, "What happens when more trained looking bodies – ballet dancers, yoga teachers – perform? Does that change the statement? What are the politics of that?" This is a question that haunts modern dance as new training techniques, new ideas about what bodies should look like, new styles of movement, permeate each generation of dancers. Martha Graham's work, for example, looks very different on 2013 bodies than it did on 1940s and '50s bodies.

A.L. Why dancers? I think Marina knew very clearly of the possible population [you could] say to – "so you have to do this kind of work for 3 months" – the only ones who could do it were dancers. She said to most of the performance artists "you gotta' learn from these guys." There were about half a dozen performance artists and about 32 dancers or people with dance training [who are] now more in realm of performance.

J.S. It's interesting for me to grapple with the issue of the bodies of the people who reperformed (these works). It's not just a set of roles and whoever you put it in it looks the same...Marina is negative about dance and dance training and rehearsal, and yet she was very happy, and needed to, use bodies trained in that way. Others would not have lasted in the show so she capitalized on dance world rigors and practices but did not want to give credence to it. And once you capitalize on those skills it changes the work. I look different [in the work] than the work would have looked in a one-day show with people whose bodies could have done it for one day.

L.T. Yozmit is a male-bodied, transgendered performance artist who has not yet transitioned but is fully committed to her femaleness. She was the only all male-bodied person who performed *Luminosity* and that brought a level of intrigue to the piece. I applaud [Marina] that Yozmit was able to perform *Luminosity*. I understand the desire to control, in a certain sense, the content of your work. I think [allowing Yozmit to perform] took the work further.

## Duration

Abramović performed most of her work once, some for no longer than fifteen minutes, others evolving over hours or days. [In contrast performance duration per reperformer at MoMA was considerably different than for many of the original works, some longer some considerably shorter.] The reperformers performed several different works in shifts, several times a day, repeated over many months. Their understanding of "durational work" is perforce different than Abramović's.

J.Z. I think that at first there was some disappointment from the performers that we weren't doing "endurance work," only 45 minutes to 2.5 hours. But doing it over 3 months, it would have been a lot harder to do all day. We had to redefine our definition of what durational work is because we were keeping this going over three months. When Marina and Ulay did [*Relation In Time*] they did it for 18 hours, once. None of us did it that long, but we did it over a much longer time.

A.L. The physical sensations – there was a nice period then, as it went on longer, there was a brewing strain on the body. As we got into the third month it was a job in a very real way. I haven't had performance gigs that were up for a period of time, I mostly do project based work. [The duration of the show] was a counter force on the experience but in some ways that spoke to [the] image [required] in this space. Everyday, like a painting, [we were there.] And there was a sort-of pleasant quotidianness about it: we're not making art, just going up stairs taking our clothes off, getting in the doorway.

D.W-S. I don't think people took into consideration the cumulative pain. The experience was profound, and different than anything Marina had experienced when doing the work. It became its own type of duration event. I personally didn't perform every minute of every day. None of us was.

L.T. [The performance] changed [with our] deepening and ongoing engagement and fatigue. We had to battle over days and months, macro[ing] each performance... When the next performer would come and move the skeleton, [for example,] it was painful to move my spine. I'd move away while the next person arranged their self with the skeleton. The audience would bear witness [to the transition, to our stiffness and pain.] When Marina did it, it was a 15-minute video mediation on breathing with the skeleton resting on her own body; as far as I know [Mariana] would have experienced it differently... I think the duration of it all, of the entire exhibit, created a space where we could deepen our relation to the work.

G.L. In *Nude With Skeleton* the skeleton's pelvic bone was on your crotch. Everyone rushed out after that piece having to go to bathroom. One female got a UTI. One performer finished their shift and smelled urine (from their body.) One performer got her period during the piece. For Marina it's the piece, whatever happens. I got up two times during the course of different shifts to go to the bathroom. I folded the arms of the skeleton and left. Then I heard from Marina that she'd had people tell her about me leaving. She sent me an email to the effect that, if I was having trouble during the piece I should concentrate on the other pieces. I told her other people were having trouble. So I spoke to other reperformers and adjusted the pelvic bone so it was sitting higher and there was less weight on my bladder so the skeleton rested more on my chest. It was more painful that way. By the time you finished you had an imprint, a tattoo of the skeleton, but that kept me from having to go to the bathroom. People came in to the resting space crying, or fainting and falling. If someone felt like they would faint, the stage manager would come in the "green room" asking for someone to replace them.

## Investigating

### Interpretation

This sections shifts focus from trying to reperform the original work to adaptations, perhaps even new versions of the performance pieces as the reperformers accommodate the setting at MoMA, the length of the exhibit, and their own growing ownership of the work from how they approach it to how it "sits" in their bodies.

L.T. There was a learning curve in the beginning. The experience was different each time we performed and with each person. Everyone brought a different focus and intensity... you were a vessel who was creating. There were instances where we kind of

taught one another, and ones where we had diametrically opposed perspectives...All of us worked within our self-proscribed scoring limitations that we developed over time. For example, in *Relation In Time*, we didn't have to stare at the wall; we could shift our gaze to the audience... For me subtle movement, and openness and expansion, were a meditative focus. There was some artistic license not apparent in the set of ways that movement occurred. In *Relation in Time* [my partner and I] began to have a quiet dance that involved a certain amount of movement. Was that ok? We didn't know. No one was privy to the first sixteen hours of Ulay's and Marina's performance [of the work]; they didn't say what they did with their braided connection.

A.L. There is so much space in everything she offers so it requires creativity, not just a precision of execution. Particularly as a dancer you're not always getting that. Even if you were doing the same exact task we didn't mimic any (one else's performance.)

J.S. Marina is against anything theatrical, [but] I think people wanted to feel they were having a profound experience and dramatize it; a mechanism toward theater. [But] it gets back to how presence can be mundane; you have to accept that... The need to feel, to do better, to show how extreme you will go can lead to strange performance tropes. On the other hand these were valid interpretations.

A.L. *Luminosity* was particularly theatrical in my experience and the most difficult to perform. I had not been drawn to it from the image, but it seemed a fabulous complement to *Imponderabilia*. In deciding how to do things eye contact was a huge one, and our movement using foot pedals, little adjustments that shifted our relationship with the audience. One of the questions I went through a lot with *Luminosity* was how theatrical to get, and how much to be quiet and let the structure do what it was going to do.

Maria S.H.M. and Abigail Levine reperforming *Imponderabilia*, Marina Abramović: *The Artist Is Present* (2010)



PHOTO: SCOTT RUDD

D.W-S. Because the arms are moving very slowly in *Luminosity* – Marina’s moved infinitesimally and that’s so difficult to do – that’s one place a performer makes a decision; how quickly to move their arms, what do they want them to look like. And I think one of the brave things Marina did was to say, “Find a position you can work with and focus on your breath. Move your arms slowly.” I think a quick look at that piece can be so misleading... it can make a person feel the woman performer is a victim or an object, or just very vain to be in that position, but in fact the performer has a tremendous amount of control and the level of commitment to the work is so intense it’s sort of rises above all the other stuff.

## From Reperformance to Performance

Repeatedly many of the reperformers expressed a struggle between remaining faithful to their understanding of Abramović’s original and finding their own way, their personal expressions and meaning in the work. This raises many questions. Is a reperformance an exact replica? What does that mean? Is it the form alone? Or is it the intention of the work, the presence of the performer, the feeling they represent? How does the reperformers instinct, so familiar to dancers, to make the performance “about something” intersect with the traditional understanding of performance art as a rejection of theatricality?

A.L. One question that was central to my doing, and to observing other reperformers [was that] I felt that there was a difference between [reperforming] and performing. I felt as though, from what I observed and heard, that [for others performing] felt like a meditation, and there were meditative elements. But I was very aware of drawing on [my] skills as a performer; that I was there for an audience at a museum. There was also a camera crew at training and at the museum.

G.L. There were two *Relations In Time*, two *Imponderabilias*, [Marina’s original and the reperformances,] both valid, both different. Because of that each dance is different each time...I always look at it like a sand painting, its there and then its gone with the wind. There was an understanding by all the reperformers of the durational aspects of stillness, [but] I don’t think it can be the same [for everyone.] That’s why she doesn’t want people to rehearse, its supposed to be unpredictable, without a forgone conclusion or definite ending...The value of what durational stillness presents, what it can represent, is in how...in a sense, it’s so much more direct and to the point than dance or theater. Performance art cuts out all the fat.

D.W-S. Marina knows a lot about how to perform... I think... it would have been interesting for each performer to have [had Marina’s] eye, had her honest raw feedback... [and] I think she had ways of finding out certain things, but... she wasn’t there and didn’t watch us perform, [it’s] not the same... Even if technically a person was falling within the guidelines [Marina] set out you can go through the paces, but does the energy read to the audience? It’s personal, difficult to talk about, [the work] is so subtle and nuanced... I think some people assume it doesn’t matter one way or the other, and some take more liberties with the works than others, and I think that some people think taking those liberties are necessary and encouraged, but only Marina can say that in the end. I think it’s problematic to assume too much about Marina’s position. I think that direct feedback [from Marina is] a link that everyone would have loved to complete.

L.T. I've adapted more of [choreographer] Deborah Hay's solos than almost any other person. Rather than re-perform, the nature of [performing Hay's solos is] really an adaptation. [But it] gave me tools. Deb's work offers the performer a whole-body awareness and different tools that one perceives as one experiences it. So there were instances when I pulled from my bag of Deb Hay tricks. I drew on Deb's meditative practices and her mantras to [help focus on the] primacy of movement when improvising and doing a work, or getting away from the treadmill of my mind, bringing myself back.

J.S. In dance, so often, there is a short period to live in anything, and in performance art even less so. It was amazing to have [a performance] become a daily practice. There are more layers and different experiences. Questions can suddenly come-up as an issue — Do you try to repeat what you did before or try to avoid what you did? You do it long enough you can try [both]. Over time... in the longer period... you develop a sense about, a criteria for what is better... and you have a challenge of resisting that. You [ask], through all different phases of doing: what is better? Why do I think it's better? That doesn't happen with one performance... At some point I had to flip a switch and decide how I wanted to do it, it was up to me. Once you realize you can make choices on your own it's fine. It raises interesting questions about [what] gaps to fill in. What is being true to the work? Do I try to look like Marina did when she did it? Do I just interpret and look different than she did? Do I try to have her mental state? What is it to do it more faithfully?

J.Z. Early on I [might] think "this is what this is about", but it would feel inauthentic; it became about something else. At some point I don't feel like we inhabited someone else's work. She gave the work to us to do; it was just different when we did it. We weren't trying to be Marina, or out Marina, it became ours. As performers we settled into [the pieces.] At first, [because] Marina says it's not theater, people were worried about [making] changes. [But] the [works] weren't "choreographed", we weren't Marina doing the piece. So the more we settled in and found what the piece meant to our own bodies the fuller the work got. It felt fuller towards the end.

## Presence

The reperformers ability to be in the moment was a primary theme of conversation. It connects both to the questions of interpretation - reperformance vs performance, concerns about how new bodies embody the work of another, and connection with the audience. Presence, the presentation of self, is a primary aspect of investigation.

J.S. The pieces, and the show, were about a notion of presence. I charged myself with that as my mission, to be as present as possible, to reveal my physical and mental landscape without performing those things. What presence felt like on different days was very different. Sometimes it was profound and sometimes it was mundane; each piece was a very different experience. [I saw] my interpretation of the work as a varied landscape - different things on different days...I didn't feel like I was trying to imitate or be Marina. I'd been given a mandate to go through the experience. People would talk about us as stand-ins, or surrogates. There was a lack of understanding that we were artists in our own right performing her work, but not trying to be her.

J.Z. At first [there was] a desire to make it about something for myself, to interpret, but that gave way to an understanding, or an idea that the work was just about being

present. I didn't have to decide what I was doing; we were the medium for other people to see what they were going to see. And sometimes it was really hard to just stay present; sometimes it was easy.

D.W-S. Marina is focused on the audience. Her ability to project her energy into the audience is tremendous. When I saw Marina in *The House With the Ocean View*, even though I'd seen two prior works, I was stunned. It wasn't a crowded gallery experience. She was living in the gallery; people would come and go, at most 20-30 at a time. I [thought], "Oh my god, is everyone having the same experience I'm having?" It's a kind-of commitment to the energy that nothing breaks her focus. I think that part of that [focus] comes with practice, and part with sheer willpower, which she has a tremendous amount of... [As a performer] It was one thing to bear witness to her energy and [another] to [question] "how is the movement going to translate on its own?" There was a year of anticipation leading to the exhibition. To have all that anticipation and finally be performing the work was a big moment for me. It was a relief to be *doing* the work.

## Negotiation

In contrast to Abramović's typical performance mode, the lack of direct audience involvement was the greatest alteration in *The Artist Is Present*. While the performers' and Abramović's physical bodies were deeply impacted by performing, the audience was "present" only as deeply as they chose to be often treating the performers more like typical museum objects than live beings. Here performers talk about active, emotional exchange with the audience.

D.W-S. Most people had never seen Marina perform the works. Audiences compared [the reperformers] with a static video moment staged for a camera. They missed the [MoMA] live performance by getting hung up on [the video] performance, and that's sad. The video was meant as a reference, not as "the thing." People maybe didn't understand her intention with the video.

*Nude With Skeleton* was my favorite; *Luminosity* was a close second. They were different points of entry for connecting with the audience...where they take me...is to a place of humility. In both of the pieces I felt very raw and I was willing to make myself completely available. Looking at someone in the audience, one of the over-whelming messages that would go through my mind was feeling that I'm really no different than you. But the performance energy needs to be there in order for there to be a place of engagement for the audience, energy that the audience can step into. But once they step into it there is an exchange between the two people. It's an active exchange... it's not just being directed out, it's not just expanding... In all the pieces, as a performer, you get a clear read on people's energy, what they bring to the performance, when they're engaged, if they're judgmental, or shifting and letting go of their judgment.

*Skeleton* was vulnerable because of being supine with a corpse; the piece is a place between life and death. My breath is a symbol of life and the skeleton is a sign of death, and that position creates a tremendous amount of empathy. People's response is very direct. People would stay with that piece for an hour or more and weep or do things to let me know they were having a personal experience.

People stayed with *Luminosity* [also,] but the performer position in *Luminosity* is so much more powerful and vulnerable. In *Luminosity* what was exciting was when I felt

the audience not just watching but participating, not just looking at me but engaging with the work; that type of energy from the audience feels very different...My position up on the wall is a place where the performer can go mentally and the viewer can also suspend everything mentally.

Unlike the original performance of *Imponderabilia*, MoMA create two entrances past the first gallery—a wide arch typical of gallery entrances, and a narrower doorway to house *Imponderabilia* allowing patrons to choose to enter between the nude performer, or not. This was a major change from the original conception. Art Margins, in 2010, echoed the performers below: “In the first performance of *Imponderabilia*, which was shut down by the police...every visitor had to squeeze through in between the naked artists in order to reach the museum’s interior space. The decision visitors had to make before entering the gallery was not only whether to enter or not, but also which of the two artists they would be facing... [*Imponderabilia*] deals, in a 1970’s kind of way, with institutional (not just personal) boundaries and with the role of the artists in the museum. In the MoMA version...there is no longer any access issue. Whether or not we decide to walk in between the two naked performers is of no consequence as no thresholds – institutional or otherwise—are crossed. And that makes all the difference.” Concerns about patron reactions likely led to the cautious double entrance – one “adventurous” one “safe.” The fact of the choice, which so changes the meaning of the work, says volumes about the contested space performance art occupies in large, traditional institutions in this century. At MoMA, *Imponderabilia* was just another thing to watch. Many visitors passed through the arch, watching others pass through what reperformer Layard Thompson called an “energetic turn-style.” The reperformers tried to embrace “The Artist’s” vision and intent in this new context, while, of necessity and by choice, making their role in the doorway anew. This institutional change illustrates an ongoing question of reperformance recognized by both artists and scholars – how, and if, to keep the force and meaning of the original in new contexts, particularly those more accustomed to archival culture than to the sometimes messy, constant reinvention of performance.

J.Z. *Imponderabilia* wasn’t the entrance to the show. Someone could come in, and look [at the exhibit,] and not go past the people in the door. In France, [when Marina and Ulay performed the work,] people had to go through them and that lasted about 1.5 hours before police shut it down. [At MoMA,] if you went through it was self-selecting, the option changed [the meaning of the work].

G.L. *Imponderabilia* was the most fun. You got take your clothes off, hang out in the museum, and see how people reacted. It was the piece that allowed you to relate the most to your partner, real eye contact. It was different with each person you worked with. You stood naked on either side of a doorway facing another person. Once you got set, whatever position you took, you’re not supposed to change position even if people come by and brush you. In the original, it was [an] important [part of] that experience, to have people who didn’t want to go through and yet had to. We only had people who chose to go through. The size of the doorway was wider than it was for the original piece [in the Galleria Comunale d’Arte Moderna in Bologna.] I always wanted to stand closer to my partner so people had to squeeze past us. People would try to crawl, figure out which way to face. One time someone walked behind me and the other reperformer stopped them; I didn’t want anyone to be stopped. I felt whatever they wanted to do was fine. It was fun listening to people be uncomfortable and then go through. Basically it was like standing in Times Square.

J.S. Having the option (to enter through an un-peopled door) made [our] doorway more like an amusement park ride; you could do this cool thing if you want. [The space between reperformers] got closer because people took more liberties and wanted the



piece to be more like the original. I think there were some performers who wanted it to be more challenging for the audience. I felt that a balance needed to be struck; [reperformers should] be close enough to give people a choice about how to touch us, and far enough [apart] so people felt free to enter. I began to think there was such a thing as too close; some performers might disagree. If you're too close it becomes an aggressive act to the audience, a dare that's alienating to them. While we wanted them to be challenged, we [also] wanted them to take the invitation. I stood with a performer who wanted to stand so close that the space between (us) was smaller than the space behind, so [the] audience went behind and that was a problem. That was where you felt fear, people said they were afraid to touch you, but it was [you] touching them [they were afraid of.] People ducked [under and behind] so as not to touch you, but then [they were] at the level of breasts.

L.T. For a lot (of reperformers) a score developed where you shifted your gaze from eye contact with one another to eye contact with those passing between.

J.S. In the beginning the fact that people are not [personally] connected put an artificial emphasis on staring. Many people got into staring into each other's eyes [while performing *Imponderabilia*.] For some it became almost an aggressive or over the top aspect of the performance. But the question is about what it is to do this most faithfully: physically faithfully, conceptually faithfully, emotionally faithfully? She gave us the freedom to stand and stare, she gave us permission. I just don't think it was necessary or unique, I felt it didn't need to be so highlighted. [*Imponderabilia*] was about being there together in the doorway, the emphasis on *being*. "Yes we're looking at each other [just] like we're pointing or arms down." It's a physical protocol... Sometimes it doesn't feel like anything, you're just standing in the doorway.

## Engagement

Engaging one's partner was a highlight of the experience for many of the reperformers. *Arts Margins* notes: "The works [Abramović] created with Ulay often focused on a formalized ritual of struggle." In my observation the reperformers' choices were more about creating and emphasizing their involvement with each other, about the relationship they were performing.

A.L. In the beginning [performing] was very much part of these extraordinary bonds [between] performers; it's almost Pavlovian, almost animalistic... I guess overall [that's] what made performing for Mariana as good as any [performance] I've had; she never told you what experience to have.

J.Z. For me the work became a lot about how people desired connection, especially in the three pieces where we could make eye contact—all the naked pieces.

L.T. I loved *Imponderabilia* because it has this energetic focus that you could develop [with your partner.] It's similar to *Point of Contact* that way...they were the pieces where I experienced the most energetic engagement [with another reperformer]. *Point of Contact* felt wedded to the notion that in a piece about stillness the nature of energy [was expressed] in backs, in [a] shifting alignment taking over the shift in the gravity in pelvis and body. With my hair tied with another performer I felt my partner's pulse through the connection of our heads. That was challenging. Two-and-a-half hours of sitting, staring at a white wall forces you to become aware of sounds and peripherally of individuals staring through the window. [*Point of Contact* and *Relation In Time* were

performed in framed “boxes” with windows to the exhibit.] My sensory awareness of people became very attuned. And there were instances where I knew that certain people were there. Sometimes I knew they were coming to the exhibit that day and sensed their presence, sometimes I just sensed that they were there.

G.L. *Relation In Time* was you, by yourself totally isolated. You needed to maintain stillness for the piece to really speak. You are inside a box, a room with a view, but you can never look outside. You can't see each other, just the blank white wall. There was nothing to focus on, [although for a while] blue tape was put up to focus on [but it] got taken down. Without something to focus on you lose all perception, all relation to time. You recognize how important it is to have something to focus on. A white void eventually envelops you. [...] For some it could be mediation, but it's not for me. You hear it all but you don't see anything; you could hear voices but couldn't see them; you could feel your partner but couldn't see them. You don't know where you are or what the time is. There is the tease of physical contact with your partner, and [the] voices outside. [...] I think the point of this piece is about being connected but not engaging. [...] In the original piece [Marina] and Ulay weren't inside a box. I always wondered why the museum and/or Marina decided to go with that.

D.W-S. I think one of the things Marina did well in the exhibit was to create a sense of camaraderie between performers, not setting up a competition about who's the best this or that—it's not a productive way to think or to set up a situation where people are going to do their best work. We made a commitment, to ourselves and to one another—we never wanted any of the works not to be occupied, to be vacant. That was something neither the museum nor Marina asked of us; it was our decision, everyone riding on everyone's energy. One interesting thing for me, when I wasn't on the floor it gave me comfort that my fellow performers were out there performing. I couldn't see them but I knew they were there. That's something unique to the MoMA retrospective. Marina never had that; she was being Marina.

## Future

J.S. Should everything be preserved in a performative way? Should they be performed? Should they be re-performed? I'm not sure. Not because I doubt the value [of doing so,] but how much [of the performance] is specific to her and to her body – after a while what is authentic? I feel that way about a lot of dance. I'm not a disciple... At what point do you embody the work and can carry it on? I defer to her in terms of what she wants our role to be. I'm happy to speak about it, teach my experience... [though] in terms of the task of preserving her work I defer to her to judge what our role is. But I think there's a question about what she thinks is her legacy. It's important that there be a diversity, a multitude of voices who have performed the work and different interpretations to remind people that there is not one way. It's important that it ends up in print [that the voices] are heard.

G.L. What I couldn't see at the time was the longevity of the impact. You can see how it would impact yourself, but when you see impact on the other reperformers... I may have a different experience, but for everyone it's a life-changing thing, a defining event in your life. [For] the reperformers it was our place in time, fresh and new but informed by what had happened in the past. It's a separate place in time.

## Conclusion

10 These interviews are a small part of the conversation surrounding “reperformance” in general and reperforming Abramović’ specifically. During the three months of the MoMA show, and immediately following, there were myriad reviews, interviews, and articles, some by the reperformers. In 2012 the movie *Marina Abramović: The Artist Is Present* was released generating a new spate of commentary. Here, through these performers voices, individually and collectively, I have tried to tease out some larger issues, answers, and questions for the future. Primary among them, “is reperformance important and what is it to reperform?” As with earlier generations of modern dancers, it is not clear that all performance artists think their work should be preserved or that it can exist past it’s initial exhibition. Yet reperformance seems necessary for the work to remain vital, more than a video archive. A balance between the original structure and intent, and new performers’ energy, instincts, and interpretations, reperformance must acknowledge that, like modern dance before it, it is nearly impossible for new bodies, in a different period, to perform the exact original. The lack of physical training techniques, the fact that performance art is built in a singular moment, on an often untrained, individual body which is not necessarily aware of techniques of performance, much less of movement, adds to difficulties in transmission. As the “history” of performance art is housed in elite institutions accountable to a vast public and to organizational rules different than that of small studios and galleries, the iconoclasm of the original must adapt. Yet, freeing the reperformers to find the performance within their own bodies helps maintain the inherent surprise, the intensity, and the audience connection so important to the original. Rebecca Schneider, in her essay “Performance Remains,” suggests that the changes—institutional or otherwise – may not matter. Through repetition, she writes, whatever the context, in total or in fragments, “to the degree that it remains, but remains differently...the past performed and made explicit as (live) performance can function as the kind of bodily transmission conventional archivists dread, a counter-memory.” She continues citing Peggy Phelan, “performance ‘becomes itself through’ disappearance.” Thus the interventions inherent in reperforming become part of the performance, of its history and meaning. Undoubtedly, *The Artist Is Present* will impact future curatorial thinking by establishing that live reperformers require a different type of care and service, a different curation if you will, than the static objects museums are used to dealing in. But for all the questions it raises, it also stands as a landmark, a new way of thinking about performance reclamation, preservation, and change.

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## NOTES

1. Opening wall text for *Marina Abramović: The Artist Is Present*, 2010, Museum of Modern Art, New York City, March 14–May 31.

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## ABSTRACTS

In 2010 New York City's Museum of Modern Art mounted a retrospective of the work of Serbian performance artist Marina Abramović. Included in the exhibition were five live works, "reperformances" of seminal, "durational" pieces created by Abramović between 1977 and 2005. Abramović considers "reperformances" to be akin to musical scores, "a structure... that you can see and then...make your own interpretation...have your own experience" while respecting "the originality of the piece." Coming in the wake of the deaths of early modern dance choreographers, at a time when choreographers who came of age in the late 1950s and 1960s are establishing a future for their work, and as the first generation of performance artists reach the end of their careers, Abramović's vision of "reperformance" proposes a mode and a philosophy for continuing the life of any performance form. Through interviews, six reperformers of Abramović's work during the retrospective address the experience of the work, the challenges and discoveries of reperformance, and the role of interpretation.

En 2010, le Musée d'art moderne (MoMA) de New York a présenté une rétrospective du travail de Marina Abramović, artiste performeuse serbe. L'exposition comprenait cinq performances "live", des reprises de pièces fondatrices, fondées sur l'endurance, créées par Abramović entre 1977 et 2005. Abramović considère les reprises, ou "reperformances", comme des partitions musicales, "une structure... qu'on peut voir puis... en faire sa propre interprétation... avoir sa propre expérience" tout en respectant "l'originalité de l'œuvre." Après la mort de chorégraphes des débuts de la danse moderne, alors que les chorégraphes qui s'établirent à la fin des années 50 et dans les années 60 assurent un avenir à leur travail et que la première génération d'artistes de performance arrive en fin de carrière, la vision qu'Abramović a de la reprise propose une modalité et une philosophie de perpétuation de formes performées. Dans les interviews réunies ici, six des artistes qui ont repris le travail d'Abramović pendant la rétrospective questionnent leur expérience sur ce travail, les défis et découvertes de la reprise, et le rôle de l'interprétation.

## INDEX

**Mots-clés:** Abramovic (Marina), exposition, interprétation, Lai (Gary), Levine (Abigail), performance, Sigman (Jill), reprise, MoMA, Thompson (Layard), Wing-Sproul (Deborah), Zimmerman (Jeremy)

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Carrie Stern (PhD, Performance Studies) is a dance scholar and educator. From 2006-2012 she wrote “Dance Brooklyn” for the Brooklyn Eagle and is developing a history of dance in Brooklyn. Her work on “whiteness” and social dance performance has been presented at a number of conferences. She has contributed several essays to Dance Heritage Coalition’s “America’s Irreplaceable Dance Treasures” and to Dance Teacher, Dance Magazine, Dancer Magazine/ Dance.com and the blog Classical TV, as well as other publications. Stern teaches dance history and culture at Queens College and Queensborough Community College. A Teaching Artist in Chicago and New York public schools for 25 years, in 2009, with musician Jessica Lurie, she founded Yo! Poetry, a school-based, performance focused, dance, music, and poetry workshop partially supported by grants from the Brooklyn Arts Council. Stern received a NYFA School Arts Partnership award for “The Play’s the Thing.” A choreographer and performer originally from Chicago, today Stern is primarily interested in improvisation. Videos of her site-specific work are in the collection of the Chicago Public Library. Stern has sat on arts panels for both the Westchester and the Brooklyn Arts Councils.