Art, performance and the spaces where they happen

Thresholds of acceptability

The architect is present?

Simon Unwin

Some artists have a sense of architecture, using it in or around their work. I am thinking of Antony Gormley whose casts of his own body are almost always located in relation to a setting – whether a beach, the courtyard of a gallery or the precipitous edges of high buildings. I am thinking too of James Turrell whose light spaces are works of architecture, places in which to contemplate the sky, to watch the sunlight pan slowly around the space. I would cite too Martin Creed whose fugitive sprinters ran approximately along the axis of the Duveen Galleries at Tate Britain in London, framed by them, avoiding visitors as they rushed from one end to the other; and Anish Kapoor for his bulbous walls or his vast 'trumpet' – *Marsyas* – in the Turbine Hall of Tate Modern.

Marina Abramović may be best known for her tortured self-mutilating performance art. But my interest is in the ways *she* uses architecture, and sometimes makes architecture. Her work may appear anarchic but it is always mediated by the space in which it happens, whether a doorway, a defined area of ground, a table, a wall or a room. Abramović may test our thresholds of what is acceptable morally and aesthetically, but she does so within spatial rules established by clear architectural frames.

At the beginning of April, my wife Gill and I were in New York. We made our way to the Museum of Modern Art. After getting two tickets we were 'greeted'. I asked the volunteer how we should explore the museum. The kindly lady said we must start at the top, with the Marina Abramović retrospective. 'She's here!' she said, 'on the second floor! But go and see the retrospective first.' I had first come across the artist when doing research for my book *Doorway*, which had started out as a project about thresholds and the in-between (Abramović had said 'the in-between is where it happens'). As we climbed MoMA's stairs I told my wife about how Abramović and her partner Ulay had set off from opposite ends of the Great Wall of China and passed each other in the middle. (I was wrong: they did walk towards each other along the wall but when they met they chatted before separating in the 'relationship' sense.





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Abramović was cross that Ulay had earlier waited at a spot which he thought would be a picturesque place to film their meeting.) With schoolboy excitement I told Gill too about a doorway into an exhibition (I could not remember where – Bologna, it turns out) between the frame of which Abramović and Ulay had stood stark naked making visitors squeeze between them, choosing to face the male or the female. It was called *Imponderabilia*. Talking on the stairs, I did not have time to wonder what might actually be in the retrospective.

The exhibition is called *The Artist is Present*. It occupies the top, sixth floor, of MoMA. It covers some forty years of work, charting Abramović's development as a performance artist. The catalogue comes with an audio disc on which the artist talks about particular pieces. She begins by recounting her introduction to art by her father who, having mixed pigments with various volatile chemicals, proceeded to explode them on a canvas and name the result *Sunset*. Abramović claims to have realised immediately that art is more about process than product, and that for an artist process means performance.

Imponderabilia is not at the entrance to the MoMA exhibition but in the gap between the first and second rooms. A nude woman and man (not Abramović and Ulay) stand facing each other, motionless in the gap, and lit to seem not quite real. There was nothing else for it. My lapel brushed against her right nipple (or so Gill told me), but no reaction. A lady in an advanced stage of pregnancy pushed through putting her hand on the girl's left shoulder as if to say sorry. No reaction. My statistically-minded wife reckoned that about nine out of ten people, men and women, go through facing the girl. It seemed the same in the adjacent video of the original piece in Bologna. I was pleased to have enjoyed a frisson I had known about for a while but thought I would never experience.

I spent little time with the works that were expressions of angst: those involving self-harm, humiliation or exposure to the mercies of members of the public. In one – *Rhythm 0* – Abramović allowed gallery visitors in Naples to do whatever they wanted with her, using items on a table that included flowers, grapes, bread, soap, a bandage, a branch of rosemary and a whip, a gun, a bullet. During six hours, and after a self-conscious start, ordinary people began to remove her clothes, hold a knife to her neck – drawing blood – adorn her with prickly rose stems, and write on her body with lipstick. Eventually the 'performance' was halted when one person loaded the gun and held it to her head seeing if she would resist attempts to force her own finger to pull the trigger. This piece is not re-enacted in reality at MoMA.

I was more interested in the spatial pieces. As well as offering permission to do things or think thoughts one might feel suspect, Abramović's work seems often to be about opposition or confrontation. In *Expansion of Space,* Abramović and Ulay forced two mobile columns apart by repeatedly crashing into them. In *Balance Proof* they held a large two-sided mirror vertically sandwiched between their naked bodies, telepathically deciding when to move away and let it fall. They did so within three seconds of each other. In *Conjunction* a large circular table was covered in gold leaf and positioned under the dome of a Lutheran church in Amsterdam. At the cardinal points sat the artist and her partner with a Tibetan lama and an Australian Aborigine elder. On consecutive days they sat from dawn, from noon, from sunset and from midnight, for four hours each time. These pieces are on video in the exhibition, as is the *Great Wall Walk*. Another, *Point of Contact*, is re-enacted by two real people. They stand quite still, in business suits (but without ties), staring impassively into each other's faces with index fingers (one hand each) almost touching. This piece is framed within a white box as if in a room across its own threshold. Also framed in its own large white box,





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but in this case like a living picture, is *Relation in Time* in which Abramović and Ulay's substitutes sit back-to-back with their hair knotted together.

There is not space here to describe all the exhibits. The three wall-mounted, open-sided 'rooms' – *The House with the Ocean View* – furnished with surreal wooden furniture and accessed by ladders made with knifes instead of rungs, in which Abramović spent twelve days of 2002, have been remade. But the *coup de théâtre* of the whole retrospective is a piece called *Luminosity*. You encounter it just as you think you have reached the end of the exhibition and can see – or perhaps take – no more. In a lofty gallery, in the brightest of light, high up, a life-like female mannequin was crucified against the wall. We were there on Good Friday. But one thing about my first impression was quite wrong. The figure was not a mannequin. Occasionally, and very slowly, the naked girl perched on a bicycle saddle moved her arms up and down, relieving the strain in her muscles. She stared forward, at the mercy of the gaze of others. A tall ladder leant against the wall in the corner waiting for the change of shift when this girl would get some relief and another would take her place.

The 'greeter' was right. Marina Abramović *was* there, on the second floor. She is, presumably, *still* there as I write this account, as her latest performance, also called *The Artist is Present*, runs concurrent with the retrospective. This piece too is architectural. 'But since I have my temple, the visitors come to see me', Abramović quotes from an unknown monk. Her 'temple' is a large white-outlined square on the floor of MoMA's Atrium. There is a small 'doorway' – no more than a gap in the white line – in the middle of one side. At the centre of the square is a small square table. Abramović sits at the table, facing the doorway. Opposite her, also at the table, is another wooden chair occupied by someone else. There is a queue of visitors waiting at the doorway to take this place. Held at a distance by the magic white line others watch, standing or sitting on the floor. They are policed by attendants. Some are told off for taking photographs (*mea culpa*). Abramović looks at her present visitor with no expression on her face. Inscrutable. No reassurance; no accusation. Her gaze never deviates, never relaxes. Only when visitors change over does she relax her shoulders for a moment. Her complexion is pallid. She is wearing a heavy red gown. There is a film of sweat on her skin. On the wall, as in a prison cell, lines number the days she has sat there and those she still has to do. Visitors at communion with her in the chair at the table either cannot stand the implacable gaze and leave quickly or challenge themselves to see how long they can last. They have no hope of winning their self-imposed contest with the goddess in her temple. I would have taken a turn except that one cuckoo stayed for over an hour. She must have loved him. (You may apply your own tone and emphasis to that last sentence.)

Marina Abramović: The Artist is Present *ran at the Museum of Modern Art, New York, from 14 March to 31 May 2010*

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