

# The Performance Art of Marina Abramovic as a Transformational Experience

Líliã Simões, Maria Consuêlo Passos

Department of Postgraduate in Clinical Psychology, Pontifical Catholic University of Pernambuco, Curitiba, Brazil  
Email: liliãbf@gmail.com

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## Abstract

Based on issues raised by the autobiographical memoirs of the performing artist Marina Abramovic, this article seeks to discuss the transformative potential of her work, based on the analysis of six selected performances in which the artist uses the body as an object of her art, exploring as a means of expression of physical limits, exhaustion of the mind and relationship with the public. Our objective is to investigate how the artist appropriates the performance space to discuss through psychoanalytic theory the ritualistic and transformative dimension of her work. Using the field concepts of Antonino Ferro and transformational object of Christopher Bollas. Finally we propose an analogy between the space of performance as the analytical field, the performance and the relationship with the public proposing a transformative aesthetic experience.

## Keywords

Art, Performance, Field, Transformational, Psychoanalysis

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## 1. Introduction

The reflections presented in this article were prompted through analyses on the written recollections of the artist Marina Abramovic and her performances *Rhythm 5*, *Rhythm 10*, *Imponderables*, *Energy at rest*, *The artist is present* and *Life and death of Marina Abramovic*. Through investigation of these elements, a correlation was made with the concept of the esthetic experience of Christopher Bollas (2015) was made. In this, aspects of the performance space created by Abramovic and her interaction with the public, which produced transformational experiences, were outlined. Moreover, the way in which her art became a phenomenon of modification of identities was discussed.

This study formed part of the research for the thesis *Condemned by them-*

*selves: the feelings of guilt in the mother-child relationship*, which was presented to the Catholic Pontifical University of Pernambuco within the postgraduate program on clinical psychology, in its research strand on fundamental psychopathology and psychoanalysis.

We sought firstly to thoroughly read Abramovic's (2017) recollections that were published in her book *Through the walls: recollections of Marina Abramovic*. This described her path as an artist: the creation and elaboration of her works, and emotional elements that she brought out in her performances, which help us to understand the connection between the path of her life and her artistic expression. Thus, in the first section of this article, we sought to bring together material to analyze her personal relationships and production. We then, in the second section, sought to discuss performance art as a ritual process that transforms experiences, as described in Alcázar's (2015) theory. Lastly, we chose to make an interpretative reading of some of her works, selected on the basis of the concepts of psychoanalysis.

The bases for this study were Christopher Bollas's (2015) theories regarding esthetic moments and transformational objects and Antonino Ferro's (2011) field concept. We sought to link these concepts to analysis on the selected works and recollections in order to comprehend the dimensions of the transformational aspects of Marina Abramovic's performance experiences and those of people who viewed her works. Lastly, we sought to understand how psychoanalysis might contribute towards the field of interpretation of the visual arts.

## **2. A Body of Work Crisscrossed by Memories**

Marina Abramovic was born in Belgrade in 1946, at the time when the Serbs were commemorating the end of the war and the beginnings of the communist regime of former Yugoslavia. She was the eldest daughter of decorated war heroes who were inveterate adepts of the communist regime, which was responsible for the armed resistance against the Axis forces, even without political and material support from the Allies. The Abramovic couple had in common a shared pride in their country. They had two children and a house in which rigid disciplinary education reigned, with well-established rules that needed to be followed with rigor worthy of the most diligent soldier. The mother was the personification of distant and almost indifferent coldness. She was methodical and establishes rules that her daughter had to follow every day. If, for some reason, some small detail was neglected, she would be punished with severe beatings (Abramovic, 2017).

It was no wonder that the essence of Marina Abramovic's work generally involved discipline, pain, sacrifice, rules and limits to the body and mind. Part of her work intensely and rigorously reconstructed the history of her life, or at least situations that she experienced during childhood. According to Abramovic, her mother's authoritarian manner was a way of preventing her daughter from being too fragile. In her work, she sought to free herself from this powerful moth-

er-figure by bringing to her performances an esthetic representing her efforts to exist as herself. In this space, she faced up to symbolic elements referring to her mother. The body limits to which she subjected herself, through pain and sacrifice in her works, also reflected her quest to be the fortress that her mother wanted her to be.

A sequence of autobiographical situations is evident in Abramovic's first series of performances. These encompassed the titles of the works, the situations in which she placed herself, the material presented and even the feelings that these works evoked. In all of this, there was always something from within her.

Abramovic graduated in fine arts and also obtained a postgraduate qualification. Like most artists, she began her artistic works with painting, but she never saw these canvases as support that would give direction to her artistic expression. This feeling lasted until the first day on which she came into contact with body art.

The movement in which using the body signified transcending materialness and the idea of objectifying and giving monetary value to art emerged in the 1970s. Abramovic extrapolated the realm of intolerable corporeal experiences to include other elements such as sweat, blood and fear. She took the view that performance art could be a tool for greater and more intense expressiveness, which could include a way to expunge autobiographical trauma. She was a girl who grew up amidst hardship and neglect, but who in adulthood managed to give new meaning to her pain and draw attention to this, which in childhood had not been possible. In her works, she responded to her mother by addressing the public.

*Rhythm 5* and *Rhythm 10* were first staged in 1974 and they gave Abramovic visibility within European artistic communities. The word that she chose to name works related to movement and repetition, with a succession of things in a sequence. It brought out what she experienced in a home that was more like military barracks, where everything had its time, order and form, and thus things had their own rhythm. In these performances, she put herself into situations in which she was at risk: she self-mutilated or goaded the public into manipulating her body and her acts.

Abramovic became an icon of performance art when she got together with Ulay, who was to be her partner for the next 12 years. Together, they compulsively produced exhaustive and provocative works. For example, in *Imponderables* (1977), the couple positioned themselves at the two sides of the entrance to the gallery, looking at each other, which forced the public to slink past their naked bodies to be able to access the room. In 1980, they staged *Energy at rest*. This was a performance that only lasted for four minutes and 10 seconds. Abramovic and Ulay faced each other, with a bow and arrow between them, such that Abramovic's heart was targeted by the arrow and Ulay held the other end without letting it fly. They placed small microphones on their chests to make their heartbeats audible, which demonstrated that the heartbeats became faster

and faster, in response to the increasing danger. This work, like several other performances that they did together, depended on their close and trusting relationship.

The intended bow causes a sense of impending danger which reveals itself as a fragility and paradigm of the body as a momentary and transitory element between life and death. The artists bring us, in general, questions about how to be alive is to be so close also the possibility of death. In these transitory spaces we still encounter the need for trust in the other from the moment our bodies are often at the mercy of other people's actions.

Finally, after more than a decade of partnership, Abramovic and Ulay decided to terminate both their professional and their affective collaboration, with the performance *The lovers: the walk on the Great Wall*, in 1989. They set out from opposite ends of the wall, on solo walks of three months, to meet and finally say farewell in the middle of the walk. With the ending of this cycle, Abramovic resumed her solo work, but without abandoning the fundamental basis of her performances, which related to discipline, rigor and sacrifice. However, there was now another perspective that suggested much more a relationship of voyeurism, which hinted that the public's regard was important for her. In exchange for the performance, the audience's regard and reactions came to form part of the conclusion of her work.

*House with sea view* (2002) was first work in which Abramovic established that observation by the spectator was the fundamental principle. For this performance, she went through ritualistic preparatory periods, given that it implied remaining silent for 12 days without eating, while the public sat watching her for hours, or sometimes returned to the gallery on other days. She developed her own method for concentrating and for controlling her body. These rituals needed to be completed and thus turned her works into significant moments of passage. This was seen both in *Naked skeleton* (2002), which dealt with death, and in *Woman in the rain* (2005), which involved a Balkan fertility ritual that evoked the crisscrossings of life.

In 2010, to marking reaching 30 years of works, Abramovic was invited to hold a retrospective exhibition at the Museum of Modern Art (MOMA), in New York). She received hundreds of people during her performance *The artist is present*. This work was emblematic of the reciprocity between this artist and her public and of the ephemeral nature of her work, which could only exist in that space and at that time. Finally, five years after her mother's death, Abramovic decided to transcend the spaces of galleries and art institutes to use a theater as her stage, in a definitive rite of passage. For this, she set up what was perhaps one of her most grandiose performances, named *Life and death of Marina Abramovic* in 2012. In this, using a surrealistic esthetic, she recalled passages from her childhood and, especially, her relationship with her mother and how, after her mother's death, she had been able to become a freer woman, "She wouldn't accept me how I was. So, when she died [in 2007], I felt liberated" (Abramovic,

2012).

We sought to divide Abramovic's works into three cycles, since the transfigurations that her works underwent were meaningful in relation to her personal transformations. In cycle 1, with *Rhythm 5* and *Zero*, there was linked to her childhood and her difficulty in breaking free from maternal authority. Cycle 2 was a phase of intense connection to and need for another person, in her performances with Ulay. Lastly, cycle 3 consisted of a series of rituals in which, in a more mature manner, Abramovic allowed herself to undergo transformative experiences derived from her own history and from her relationship with the public, in processes that were almost analytical. Following this, we discuss these cycles in relation to Antonino Ferro's (2011) field concept and Christopher Bollas's (2015) transformational experience.

### 3. Performance: From Rituality to Otherness

Performance emerged in the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century through breaking away from the concept of art as creation of objects. The present, the moment, the experience and what was undergone during the action became the things that mattered. Art ceased to exist as something material or permanent that could be negotiated or exhibited. It came to a point of abstraction in which behavior and attitude were worth more than creation of something concrete. Usually, the artist became a fundamental element. Ultimately, according to Josefina Alcázar (2014), performance sought to achieve a closer relationship between art and life, in a place that would allow subjects to express themselves and convert their lives into creations, thus making themselves the objects.

In placing Abramovic's works, Canevacci (2014) correlated performance art with the vanguard of other movements within the history of art. It broke away not only from materialness, through transforming and breaking up the art market, but also especially through transforming the relationship with spectators. In this, passivity towards a preconceived work was abandoned and "activation of the public" was proposed, *i.e.* the public was called on to become co-creators.

For Abramovic, the relationship with the audience was fundamental. The way in which she expressed herself in her works ended up involving the spectators, through empathy, identification, voyeurism or even a certain degree of sadism, when in some works she injured herself or allowed herself to be injured by the public. It is of interest to note that the concept of performance art is connected, at least from this point of view, with psychoanalysis, which is also nothing other than relationships, expression, elaboration, creation and transformation. Choosing to research Abramovic's works and connect them to psychoanalytical concepts stemmed initially from her written recollections and, fundamentally, from the seductive nature of her works.

We believe that Abramovic used the moment of the performance as a means of returning to her memories so as to give them new meaning. At the time of calling on the public to participate, she also proposed an esthetic experience in

which these people could, together with her, become involved in the performance moment. The experience that she proposed brought the spectators into the work, such that they could transform her and be transformed by her. These experiences not only related to the actions to which Abramovic's body was subjected or what the public proposed to do to her, but also were moments at which new meanings were assigned and views came back as support that enabled her to pose the problem of her memories and emotions. Abramovic's works brought out aspects of her life and led her to cross emotional limits that seemed to be intrinsic to the performance art movement:

Performance artists produce their autobiographies with their bodies. They speak about themselves, their environments and their personal and social histories; they bear witness to their lives and contexts. In their performances, some artists do introspective investigations while others analyze how they act and interact with their bodies in day-to-day life. However, all of them are constructing autobiographies of their experiences (Alcázar, 2015).

Moreover, we believe that the idea of joint participation leads artists and the public to share these histories. This structural relationship expands the notion of performance beyond something that is only to be watched. Regina Melim (2011) defined this very well using the concept of "performance space", which exactly translated this moment of creation and shared experience in this place and at this time of correlation of creator, work and spectator.

The word performance derives from the old French verb *parfournir*, which means "to complete" or "to do in its entirety". It refers precisely to the moment of the act that is completed through an experience. Through various rituals, Abramovic sought experiences of liberation and transformation over a large proportion of her life. In her works, an analogy with rites of passage can be observed: a feature that has formed part of our society since its earliest days and which functions as transition experiences.

According to Victor Tuner (1979), the importance of ritualistic events in the different societies that have been studied by anthropologists cannot be measured: it can only be said that these are fundamental to the dynamics of the community. Their symbolic properties are a fertile furtherance of transformation or affirmation of a living order. We believe that this is also the essence of Abramovic's work, *i.e.* to provoke, feel, transform and be transformed by this experience.

Canevacci (2014) also explains Abramovic's works in relation to the potential of rituals and transformations as a relationship of dialogue between her otherness and that of others. Moreover, her works enable changes that also arise from these meetings: changes that are esthetic at the moment when the subject sees himself before a work of art and perceives that he is changing and that his identity is no longer what it was if it had been determined before this event and shifted to another context. According to this author, art either modifies identity or it is not art. In this regard, performance art comes very close to being a ritual,

since it is something that involves a series of symbolic acts that are carried out at a specific moment by the artist.

#### 4. Art, Artists and Their Metamorphoses

In Abramovic's recollections, she recalled that in doing performances, she went through veritable rituals of liberations, as if through pain and the relationship with the people watching them, she would be able to free herself from her internal demons. The artist's submission to the pain and risk of life and by giving a violent reaction on the part of the spectators directly connects her lived experiences with the mother, her work reconstructs this relationship in space and time and through the memory of her childhood painful and of a mother who beat her, she could finally resignify this pain. Her art became transformed into a warranty for her sanity and a tool for very many possibilities beyond communication of an artist's expression, to become a possible route to sublimation. In this regard, it makes sense to connect her works with the concept of esthetic experience and the transformation process.

According to [Bollas \(2015\)](#), these experiences relate to the search for transformational objects and the search for experiences of the first relationship with the mother, which once was experienced by children not as an object but as a process that transformed their internal and external settings. In adulthood, this becomes an endless search, through future expectations of something that was inherent to the past. Adults' search for transformations constitute a memory of these first relationships, and what is sought may, for example, be a place, an event or an ideology that we wish to make use of to transform ourselves in some way.

We think of making the connection between Abramovic's work and Christopher Bollas's theory of the transitional object especially from the idea of the esthetic moment, *i.e.* a moment at which a person is struck by an experience and the ensuing transformation. Abramovic's performances, as encounters for her and for the public can be correlated with this moment that materializes in space and time, thereby providing transformative acquisitions for these subjects. This can be understood as a representation of individuals through relationships that are continually transforming us: not only through words but also as a presence, a moment that is experienced or an esthetic contemplation.

This moment of contemplation that is set up in the performance space ([Melim, 2011](#)) produces transformational experiences for the artist and the spectator. According to [Canevacci \(2009\)](#), these modifications of identities are the phenomenon that comes closest to the concept of what art is. This is especially so in speaking about Abramovic's art: her performances created spaces for possibilities, and these spaces together with the performance moment that arose from this encounter between the artist and her active spectators gave rise to something resembling Antonino [Ferro's \(2011\)](#) field concept.

According to this author, the field arises from the need to name the multipo-

tential place and also from all the possibilities that may open up during the meeting between the patient and the analyst in the analytical space. This field continually undergoes transformations, which come into existence through union between the possible worlds of the analyst and patient. There does not seem to be any impediment to thinking of the relationship between the artist and the public in these terms. Everything else that takes place as a result of this encounter, *i.e.* emotions that are brought out and memories that are revived in this space at that time, has its own respiration (Ferro, 2011).

## 5. Final Remarks

From our analysis on the three cycles into which we divided the works by Abramovic that we chose to investigate, we can see that she appropriated spaces, material symbols, memories and her public as elements for creating her works. This was done not as concrete art objects but as works that existed in the present, *i.e.* ephemerally, and which would terminate in the field of transformations<sup>1</sup>. Thus, they would be concluded when this environment that she created, together with her movements and the interactions with the spectators, would enable this transformational experience. Our intention was to think of her performance spaces as fields that promoted encounters with transformational objects, thus causing emotional turbulence that would give rise to these identity-modifying experiences.

In cycle 1 of the performances, Abramovic brought in elements of her memory and life history in order to seek to give them new meaning. Her artistic support was her body and her feelings and pain in producing the experiences involved in her works. We interpreted the sacrifices and pains to which she subjected herself as a return to the maternal relationship with the aim of dealing with it and surmounting it symbolically in the search for freedom. Freeing herself from the ghosts of the past and from a relationship of fear and guilt that she had with her mother. Through her art, full of autobiographical symbols, it was possible for the artist to experience her emotions and finally to feel a person independent of her past and from the moment her work allows her to recreate herself.

*Rhythm 5* was Abramovic's first performance and was staged in the Student Center in Belgrade. She set up a wooden structure on the floor, in the shape of a five-pointed star, and then set fire to this star while lying down at its center. She remained there until she passed out through inhalation of smoke. In the description of the work, the star represented the symbol of the Yugoslavian communist party and all the ideology through which it had been created. The same star also symbolized her mother, her dedication to the party as a war heroine, her authority and her repressive attitude that was reflected in her coldness towards her daughter.

The public passively watched Abramovic gradually suffocate due to the smoke

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<sup>1</sup>This expression is linked to the concepts of Ferro (2011) and Bollas (2015).



from the burning star and lose consciousness. This action that was shared with the public expressed the feeling of being asphyxiated and captured by this repressive force, which represented her relationship with the ideals of communism and the harshness and suffocating authority of her mother. The way in which she chose to carry out this ritual, through reconnecting herself with these symbols and emotions, formed part of a process of transformation of the wraiths of her childhood.

The public's viewing and participation started to make sense in her works, not only to allow her to relive these experiences but also to make it possible to tell people about them. This look was part of a look she did not have in her childhood, of an attention she always sought from the maternal figure and that in a way she only managed in extreme situations. In the absence of the maternal gaze, Marina is able to attract the eyes of admiring spectators, dedicate time and attention only to look and be interested in her, just as the mother's gaze for her baby and her child is a look that inspires in the child self-confidence and offers you tools in building your personality, Marina will only gain that look much later during her performances.

In *Rhythm 0*, she increased the public's power of action by inviting people to participate through intervening in relation to her body. She thus constructed unpredictability and became vulnerable. She stood in front of a table on which 72 objects were placed, including an axe, roses, feathers, a pistol, a ball and various other things. People could do what they wanted with the objects and with the artist. Abramovic's surrendering of herself triggered an uncontrollable process. The public was initially static but little by little began to injure the artist. Over the course of the six-hour duration of the performance, her clothes were cut, her chest was pricked with rose thorns and a loaded gun was pointed at her head. Her vulnerability provoked people into sadism, just like the vulnerability of a child who is subjected to punishment at the hands of its mother. It is possible that this performance field favored an esthetic experience relating to archaic sadistic fantasies, compared with experiences with the maternal figure.

We took the period in which Abramovic produced performances in partnership with Ulay to be a second cycle. Most of these works addressed relationships with other people as points of reflection, trust, comradeship, intimacy and committal, along with relationships between bodies. In *Imponderables* (1977), the couple remained standing, naked, facing each other, at each side of the door that gave access to the Community Gallery of Modern Art in Bologna, Italy. To enter the gallery, visitors had to pass through the narrow space between the couple and had to choose what of them to look at. This was a provocation in a type of culture in which the naked body still caused reactions. The public was confronted with being in a position, sometimes one of embarrassment, of visual and physical contact with the performers.

There were other works that addressed the experience of trust and need for another person. For example, in *Energy at rest* (1980), Ulay held a bow with a

drawn arrow pointing towards Abramovic's heart. Any slip could lead to shooting the arrow. The couple remained in these positions for hours in a test of total trust that the public observed. The partnership between Abramovic and Ulay ended in another performance that consisted of a ritual of separation: the paths and sacrifices that need to be faced at the time of following different paths. *The lovers: the walk on the Great Wall* (1989) marked the end of their professional and affective partnership, as mentioned earlier.

Lastly, in the third cycle into which we divided Abramovic's path, she became an artist who valued the performance field even further, as a space for transformative experiences that her works proposed. *Artist present* was a performance that she took to the Museum of Modern Art in New York in 2010. This was a phenomenon that attracted more than 750,000 people over the six days of its presentation. In this performance, Abramovic remained static and silent over a six-hour period per day, while 1400 visitors had the chance to spend a few minutes in the seats facing her. The meeting of eyes aroused a wide diversity of reactions, from mirthless laughs to uncontrollable fits of tears.

Also focusing on the artist-public relationship, the anthropologist Massimo Canevacci (2014) addressed the transformative potential of Abramovic's works. In his view, the performance was emblematic of the possibilities for mutual transformation between the performer and the spectator, while visitors were invited to sit face-to-face with her, in silence and for the length of time that they wanted to. Abramovic would close her eyes when a visitor got up to leave and would open them again when another person occupied this place.

This opening and closing of eyes was a symbolic movement in which Abramovic put forward the idea that looking might control spaces and other people. The type of encounter that this work provided was uncontrollable: it created a change that represented the esthetic moment that BOLLAS (2015) suggested. When subjects are faced with an artistic work and perceive that they are changing, they are becoming something else. It is in this field and in this encounter with the transformational object that the spectator and the artist experience emotions and captured by the event and shifted to another state of being.

According to BOLLAS (2015), this movement is an attempt to experimentally retrieve the relationship with the transformational object. This was experienced as the maternal object: seeking someone, something, some place or some moment that would provide the elements for this retrieval, which we decided to call the transformational field. This was linked to idea of a field that FERRO (2011) proposed, which referred to the analytical encounter of complex transformational emotional turbulence that the analyst experienced at that moment in space and time. We believe that there is an analogy with Abramovic's work, in which the moment of the performance and the interaction between the artist and the public cause emotions in which transmutations also exist, *i.e.* a transformational field.

The thousands of people who went to MOMA did so not only to get to know

Abramovic's work but also to experience a very specific moment of exchanges of gazes with her. In the documentary *Mariana Abramovic: The artist is present* (2010), the various reactions that this encounter caused among people were very clear. The transformational experience took place through an exchange with the object, which in this case was the artist. At the time of the esthetic field, it was common for people to feel a profound connection with Abramovic and to experience a momentary fusion that, despite the silence, caused people to get in touch with memories and emotions that formed part of this experience. This related to the life histories of Abramovic and the participants, who became able to share their own subjectivities just by sitting there and exchanging gazes, like in all encounters.

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