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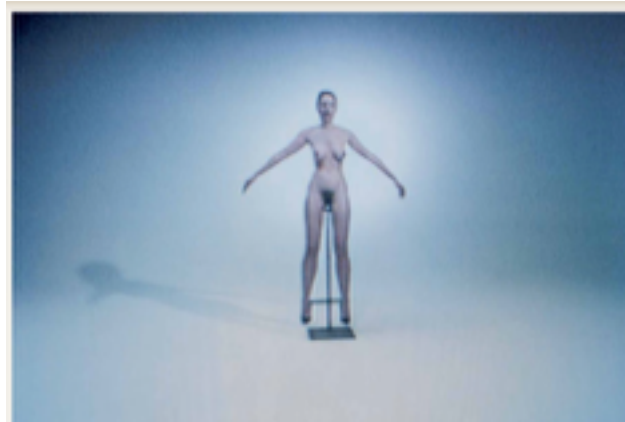
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A Closer Look at the Everyday Self:
Feminism Expressions in the Art of Marina Abramović

A woman hangs naked in mid-air, straddling a bicycle seat. The sterile, bright light that shines upon her against a blank background illuminates the pained expression she carries from dangling in this painful position, arms extended, for a protracted length of time. Serbian-born Marina Abramović was fifty-one years old at the time she first performed this piece, *Luminosity*, in 1997 at the Sean Kelly Gallery in New York City (skny.com), and *Luminosity* demonstrates a form of endurance art (Shalson 106) for which Abramović is now known globally, yet the performance also brings to light feminist notions of empowerment, such as having a self-identity and agency in relation to external forces. Further, Abramović has regularly been a guest speaker, often appearing at feminist-related discussions and events (Kimball). Though Abramović asserts she is not a feminist, this paper suggests that the greater context of Abramović's performance work delves into a unique landscape of feminist principles; Abramović translates these principles into performances that explore aspects of the self, of spirituality, gender, culture, and so on, all the while infusing critical aesthetics of performance into work that expresses feminist principle.



While Marina Abramović herself states that she does not follow feminist ideology, her body of work is a testament to the fact that she is, in fact, a feminist. Through performances such as *The Great Wall Walk* and *Rhythm 0*, Abramović addresses the realization of female autonomy and departs from traditional ideals of gendered coupling. In *Rhythm 0*, Abramović stands passively for hours, receiving increas-

ing amounts of pain and pleasure from a divided audience of those who plan to harm her and those who wish to protect her:

With a description reading "I am the object," and, "During this period I take full responsibility," Abramović invited spectators to use any of 72 objects on her body in any way they desired, completely giving up control. *Rhythm 0* was exemplary of Abramović's belief that confronting physical pain and exhaustion was important in making a person completely present and aware of his or her self. (Gershman)



Here, Abramović stands passive, motionless—tortured, manipulated, and, in all senses, *othered*, suggesting feminist discussion of identity and autonomy: the artist, through her own experiences of being objectified and sexually assaulted (Gershman), establishes her own role within this small commentary on autonomy, self, and society as the performer through the various levels of pain and pleasure she receives; and the audience strengthens its own awareness by being forced to harm or to protect the artist. Abramović's idea of a non-neutral, sexed, "imaginary body" (Gatens 231) that was created in an artistic space provides the "framework in which we can give an account of how power, domination, and sexual difference intersect in the lived experience of men and women" (Gatens 230). Abramović also demonstrates feminist thought by showing us that, the more someone is propelled into a particularly gendered-binary space, the sense of self and the need for independence become that much more pronounced, and Abramović transforms these feminist discussions of female autonomy and of gendered coupling within the vast liminal space she co-created with her artistic partner and lover, Ulay, in *The Great Wall Walk* (1988). In this performance, Abramović and Ulay walk toward each other from opposite ends of The Great Wall of China. Each step on the Wall brings them closer to their intended end goal: separating from one another, both professionally and personally:

Walking, they both tell of a sense of initiation: Marina of a sense of happiness at being free from ballast, Ulay of a sense of completeness, of a mingling of past, present and future, of becoming one with the Wall. They meet after 90 days in Er Lang Shan in the Province Shaanxi near Shen Mu, where they take each other by the hand to say good-bye. (Haberer)

Two genders meeting— drawn to each other, in a sense— only to liberate Ulay and Abramović from one another is a kind of demonstration: through the act of marching toward one another, Abramović departs from the traditional paradigm of gendered coupling and, instead, performs the realization of female autonomy— central concepts within feminist discussion.

Before Abramović parted ways with Ulay in 1988, Abramović explored other feminist notions of gender fluid space in *Relation in Space* and *Imponderabilia*. *Relation in Space* challenges cultural expectations,



where Ulay and Abramović run toward each other and collide in the nude, attempting to create as much noise and physical bodily impact as possible: “We really wanted to have this male and female energy put together and create something we call *death self*. It was very important to cooperate and mix our ideas together, and not to ever say to anybody who the idea comes from. It was a mixture that really made sense to us, and it created a kind of third energy field” (MoMa). *Relation in Space* challenges how we might view

the conflicts that the very idea of gender creates. Abramović and Ulay, again, bring forth these gendered themes in *Imponderabilia*:

Naked we stand opposite each other in the museum entrance.
The public entering the museum has to turn sideways to move through the limited space between us.
Everyone wanting to get past has to choose one of us. (Media Art Net)



Further, *Imponderabilia* manifests a collision of genders within a liminal threshold that suggests feminist themes:

in one way, Ulay and Abramović are forced to confront each other; in another, exhibit attendees must

choose which gender upon which to focus, as the doorway is the only way into the remainder of the exhibit, evoking, yet again, ideas of gender-fluid space.

Abramović sets a unique table for us: although the artist does not embrace a feminist label, she does bring forth feminist maxims of autonomy and gender-fluid space, and she also addresses feminist notions of sexuality but within the context of art spaces through such works as *Role Exchange* and *Balkan Erotic Epic*. In *Role Exchange*, Abramović switches places with a prostitute: the prostitute takes the artist's place at the gallery, and Abramović assumes the role of the prostitute in the red light district (Stanovic 566). Though part of the point of this performance is that art transcends the traditional expectations



The artist in the role of S J in the window in the Red Light District waiting for customers

of a space and argues what constitutes art (567)— *Was Abramović the performer? Was it actually the prostitute? If the performer was, in fact, the one in the Red Light District, what had the role of the prostitute become back at the gallery?* Even so, the artist, here, also demonstrates the nature of sexuality within different spaces by incorpor-

ating a sex worker into the art space. The artist highlights this juxtaposition in roles and creates a limited sense of self and of sexual agency by appropriating the role of the prostitute and, thus, creates a “conceptual space” (567), where the performer and prostitute both acknowledge the confines of their redefined freedoms, and all still within the confines of a gendered role. Abramović conveys feminist concepts of sexuality within an art space in *Role Exchange* by way of a literal exchange of professional roles, and she also reveals the nature of human sexuality by interpreting Balkan pagan fertility rites in an art-house, high-concept pornographic collaboration in *Balkan Erotic Epic*. Abramović's aim is to amplify how eroticism was used for everyday issues in Serbian folklore and, by highlighting the importance of female sexuality within a historical context, she artistically demonstrates the importance of sexuality as a normalcy, which is a feminist concept. While one scene in the film depicts a woman nonchalantly placing a fish inside her vagina for a period of time, powdering it, and putting it in her husband's tea as a means for a life-

time of devotion and children, another scene, again, depicts this sense of equal sexual agency by showing us a row of women, all of whom are listening to the woman in the center tell a folk story of a girl who sits, mourning for her lost love, pleading for him to take her “pillows.” The dead loved one exclaims that she must no longer yearn for his affection and, instead, move on in life (*Destriected*). Even if Abramović intends only to employ eroticism as a means to uncover how sexuality existed in the “everyday” for historic Balkan society (Metzger), by doing so, the artist actually sets up a direct connection to feminism, in which we think about how sexual agency for everyone should be the *everyday*—where sexual inequality is nonexistent.



When Abramović artistically unifies various portrayals of sexual agency within the scope of the *everyday*— that is, female autonomy, gender-fluid space, and sexuality within art— she actually acknowledges duality of the mind and body, a concept originating from the Enlightenment (Rose 360); further, Abramović addresses dualism by highlighting it through a lens that ties the mind and body directly to feminist principle by showing us the agency of self. So, doesn't it suggest that Abramović's body of work, ultimately, leans toward a feminist angle, where not only are the men offered agency of mind and body but where everyone is afforded that same “intellectual transcendence” (Rose 361)? Though Marina Abramović has rejected feminist labels because she does not want to limit herself to one particular interpretation, even this claims speaks to the importance of feminism because it shows us that feminist principles are relevant to every aspect of our culture: perhaps she chooses to remain free from labels and limitations because she really *isn't* a feminist, but it seems to make more sense that she does so in order to remain accessible, at the very least, to a wide-ranging audience.

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