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“Eat the pain”. Food in the work of Marina Abramović

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Abstract

Marina Abramovic is Yugoslavian-born and New York based pioneer of performance art. By radically using her body as an artistic medium, she has been pushing it to the limit. While her early work included self-harming practices, Abramovic later moved on to long durational art form that is focused on meditative lingering where the emphasis lies on a spiritual or esoteric moment. In Abramovic's entire oeuvre food plays an important role. She doesn't use food as an object of art itself, but she creates her art around the symbolism and history of food, using it as a useful tool in her actual performance art. This general question of the role of food in Abramovic's oeuvre will be the focus point of my article, while taking the closer look on certain performances such as: *Thomas Lips* (1975), *Nightsea Crossing* (1982), *Balkan Baroque* (1997), *The Onion* (1995), *Spirit Cooking* (1997), *The Kitchen* (2009).

1. Everything started with a peanut¹. Before she got engaged in performance art, Yugoslavian-born artist Marina Abramović studied and worked in her hometown Belgrade as a painter. She often painted clouds. One day she was invited to contribute to the small exhibition in a friend's studio. Abramović took the chance and she brought one peanut in its shell, fixed it to wall of the studio with a pin, and she entitled her work *The Cloud and its Shadow*. This was the first action that took the artist away from two-dimensional and a starting point of her career as an action and later performance artist.

By radically using her body as an artistic medium, Marina Abramović managed to open up a new dimension in Performance Art. During her provocative performances she has been pushing physical and psychological boundaries since the 1970s, turning herself into her own working material. While her early performances (*Rhythm 0*, *Rhythm 10*, *Thomas Lips*) still included self-harming practices, such as scarring, flogging, self-freezing or even hitting herself against walls, Abramović later moved on to so called *Slow Art*; a long durational art form more focused on meditative lingering where the emphasis lies on a spiritual or esoteric moment.

From the first episode with the peanut until nowadays in Abramović's entire oeuvre, food plays an important role. She incorporates different aspects of food and eating (such as cooking, the kitchen, groceries, fasting) into her artistic practice, without however turning the food itself into an object of art, like, for example, Daniel Spoerri did in the 1960s with the movement *Eat Art*. Abramović rather cre-

¹ Essling, L., 2017, “Die Wolke im Raum”, in *The Cleaner. Marina Abramović*, Berlin, S.8.

ates her art around the food, it's symbolism and history, using food and certain eating practices as a useful tool in her actual performance art that with time has become more and more immaterial. This general question of the role of food in Abramović's oeuvre will be the focus point of my article.

2. Already in her early career, Abramović never really put the focus on objects. The main object of her work was always her own body. In this sense, Abramović is as an artist closely related to the group of visual artists who historically had already established the relationship between art and nothingness; artists such as John Cage, Yves Klein, Robert Barry and many more.² Abramović isn't a consummate performer either.³ As a performance artist who constantly brings her own body to its limits -a condition that she declares as a subject of her work- she has always been rather minimalistic in incorporating on the stage. In one of her earliest pieces *Rhythm 2* (1974), Abramović took medications typically used for patients of catatonia and schizophrenia and filmed the results in front of an audience, wishing to test the state of unconsciousness as part of performance. The performance ended after five hours when the medication had eased off. This early exploration of the connection between mind and body became a consistent part of Abramović's performance practice.

The one year younger performance *Thomas Lips* that took place for the first time in 1975 in Krinzinger Gallery in Innsbruck, started off with Abramović eating one kilogram of honey, followed by the consumption of one liter of red wine. After that she undertook a range of actions that pushed her physical limits to an extreme and finally resulted in the transgression of bodily boundaries: cutting a five-pointed star into her stomach with a razor blade, whipping herself until she eventually lay down on a cross made out of ice blocks. In the original 1975 performance, after 30 minutes on the ice blocks, the artist was carried away by members of the audience who could not stand the situation any longer.

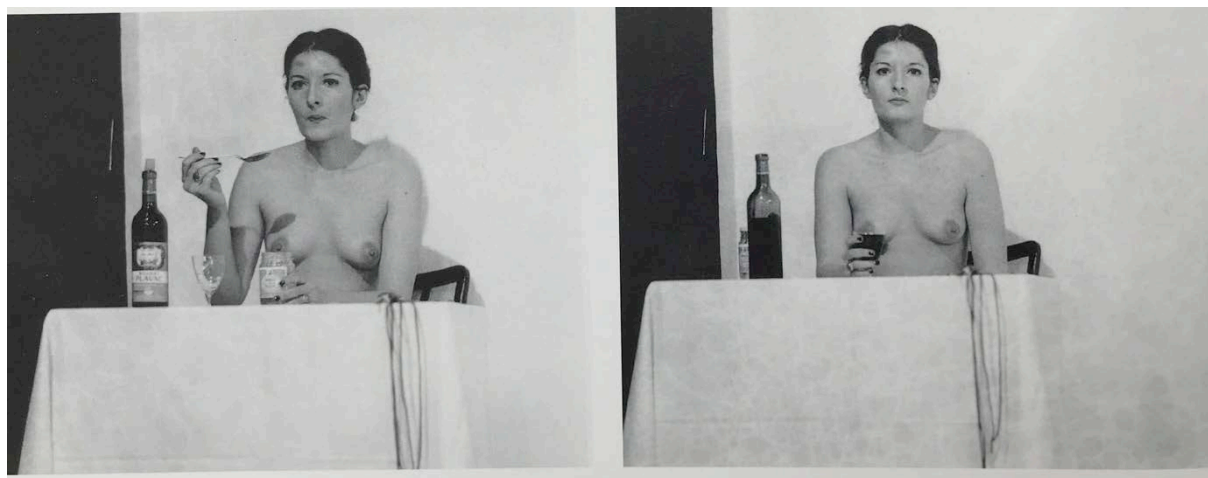


Fig. 1 – *Thomas Lips* (1975)

Sweet start, bitter end. Why did Abramović incorporate a huge amount of honey and wine at the beginning of the performance? Wanted she intoxicate herself first so that she could more easily bear the pain she would cause herself later? Or does honey and wine have a symbolic meaning? Is there a chance that through excessive consumption of honey and wine Abramović wanted to critique the bourgeois way of life?

² Peyton-Jones, J., Obrist, H. U., 2014, "Foreword", i: *Marina Abramović. 512 Hours*, London, p. 5.

³ Jan Avgikos has the opposite view to this. Read more in: Avgikos, J., 1998, "Go with the flow", in *Marina Abramović. Artist Body*, Milano, Charta, p. 341.

The thought-provoking performance *Thomas Lips* is highly charged with historic background and religious symbolism. In the Christian tradition honey stands not only for the sweetest, but also for the purest product. By its very nature, honey is a mixture of substances that comes from the plant and the animal world as one. As such, honey is allegory to word of Lord, to his wisdom in general.⁴ Eating honey and drinking wine in *Thomas Lips* obviously alludes to the Eucharist; the Christian rite that was instituted by Jesus Christ during the Last Supper when Jesus commanded his followers to *do this in memory of me* while referring to the bread as *my body* and the cup of wine as *the new covenant in my blood*. The Eucharist is the most prominent food ritual by establishing and realization of Christian Culture. It is a ritual that remembers Christ's sacrifice and the constitutional power of this ritual lies in consumption of God in the transformed form of bread and wine. With Christianity the transubstantiation of Body and Blood became the main formula for the metabolism between the nature and culture; for the reversible transformation of Word into Body, from Body into Word.⁵

Abramović knows this very well, she re-creates the Lord's Supper, by incorporating honey that stands for Christ's Word. But with honey she also implies to the sweetness of Paradise: the promised land is a country where honey and milk flow. Only, the promised land is at this point not behind the corner. After celebrating the ritual of Christ's sacrifice, after consuming the God, Abramović continues the performance with her own self-sacrifice- with the consumption of pain: by cutting the star with a razor blade, whipping herself, heating and freezing while lying on the ice-cross.

Honey and wine, wisdom and blood, spirit and body. Playing with these differences, following a very clear mizen-scene (eating, drinking, breaking the glass, cutting the star on her stomach, whipping, laying down on the cross, heating, freezing) and carefully selecting the Iconography from Christian tradition (cross, star, fire, ice, honey, wine, crystal glass) Abramović creates some sort of ritual dramaturgy which is crucial for the piece. Transiting through different rituals, she leaves the physicality of the body, she overcomes its limitations by enduring the pain in order to reach a higher consciousness. Following this way, she transforms the object of violence into the subject of performance. Through her own transformation she believes that she can transform the former social status or identity of her audience. This is the moment where Abramović creates a link between archetypal rituals and Action Art: both are transformational⁶.

From her early age, Marina Abramović's interest in transformation and transcendence were influenced by esoteric authors such as Madam Blavatsky, Mircea Eliade or Daisetz Teitaro Suzuki.⁷ She was additionally inspired by artists like Yves Klein and Joseph Beuys who applied alchemy, mysticism and shamanism within their art, that's why she also started bringing the touch of spirituality into her performances.⁸ Abramović believes in spirituality, not in a particular religion, and she thinks that every artwork needs to contain a spiritual component. Considering this, it is no surprise that Abramović's critics are very ambivalent towards her "enthusiastic confession to spiritualism"⁹ and accuse her approach of continuing the already discredited association between art and religion¹⁰. With time, Abramović leaves the motives and iconography of sacral rituals and she turns to an even more minimalistic, reductive performance art which is based on the artist's asceticism that also considers food and eating practices.

⁴ Menzel, W., 2011, *Christliche Symbolik*, Berlin, p. 415.

⁵ Neumann, G., "Vom Essen toter Tiere" in *Die Zeit*, Oktober 19th, 2000, 8:00, edited on January 2nd 2014, 8:17 Uhr. https://www.zeit.de/2000/43/200043_sm-fleisch.xml/komplettansicht?print

⁶ Using the definition and description of ritual I lean on the theory of A. van Gennep, in Van Gennep, A., 2011, *Les Rites de Passage*, Paris.

⁷ Zuber, D., 2017, "Leuchtkraft im Norden- Die Verortung des Spirituellen in der Kunst der Marina Abramović", in *The Cleaner. Marina Abramović*, Berlin, pp. 252-253.

⁸ Zuber, p. 253.

⁹ Zuber, p. 252.

¹⁰ McEvilley, T., 1998, "Stadien der Energie: Performancekunst am Nullpunkt?", in Stoos, T. (Hrsg.), *Marina Abramović: Artist Body; Performances 1968-1998*, Mailand, S. 27.

3. In 1975, Abramović moved to Amsterdam where she met the German performance artist Frank Uwe Laysiepen (known as “Ulay”) who became her lover and collaborator until 1988, when they walked the Great Wall of China for 90 days from either end, met in the middle, and finished their relationship. Abramović and Ulay travelled extensively together, through Tibet, Australia, India and many other countries in order to encounter non-Western cultures with the tradition of pushing the body to the physical extreme in order to eliminate the fear of death, pain and the physical limitations of Western society. By learning and using those practices, especially those she met by the half-nomadic Pitjantjantara, Abramović started focusing further on mental and physical conditioning of the artist and this led to the realization of her first long-duration performances such as *Nightsea Crossing* (1981-1987) and *The Lovers* (1988) where the objects and materials are reduced to a minimum while endurance and concentration of mind and body were shifted into the focus of the performances. In order to explore time, endurance and consciousness, fasting became a component of a pronounced interest.

The abstinence of food plays for Abramović a crucial role in the process of “cleansing” the body, a method that refers to Abramović’s idea that the body as a house: “My longest fast was during the performance *Nightsea Crossing* when I went sixteen days without food. The first three days were intolerable as I visualized or even smelled the food. When the fourth and fifth day came this absolute need for food started to disappear and I thought I would collapse. But instead one’s body starts to use the direct outside energy which is always there, always available. Normally we don’t even have access to it because we are never open to it. In this heightened mental state we become very aware of things”¹¹.



Fig. 2 – *Nightsea Crossing* (1982)

¹¹ Abramović, M., 1995, *Cleaning the House*, London, Academy Editions.

Emptying the body in order to achieve a higher consciousness which is required for the ability to perform long durational pieces belongs to Abramović's artist's asceticism. But Abramović is not a hunger artist, she doesn't expose the hunger as an object of art in the sense Franz Kafka's hunger artist does. Neither is fasting for Abramović a part of some particular religious ideology as this was the case with Christian ascetics such as Holy Antony or Joannes Klimax whose fasting practices were wonderfully described by German Dadaist Hugo Ball.¹² Abramović's fasting also doesn't have a direct political character like for example Gandhi's fasting; her fasting is not in a hunger-strike. Maintaining solidarity with the non-Western world, Abramović rather practices the abstinence of food in a spiritual or esoteric sense: "When the energy which is used up for digestion shifts from our stomach to our mind, we enter a lucid state of consciousness, Peace, a feeling of balance, a still bliss and clear ideas appear"¹³. Applying this kind of an old shamanic approach into her contemporary praxis, Abramović created several long durational performances where she shows how fasting increases her concentration. After the *Nightsea Crossing*, she performed for example in *The House with the Ocean View* (2012) where she built three rooms within a gallery and lived there for twelve days without food. Throughout 40 years, Abramović developed a challenging teaching method called *Cleaning the House* for her students to prepare themselves for long durational performances. During the workshops, the students are obligated to abstain from food for several days. Nevertheless, the workshop series are open to anyone because they provide "universal skills"¹⁴.



Fig. 3 – *House with the Ocean View* (2012/2017)

¹² Ball, H., 2011, *Byzantinisches Christentum. Drei Heiligenleben*, Göttingen.

¹³ Abramović, M., 2018, *Writings 1960-2014*, Cologne, p. 281.

¹⁴ <https://mai.art/cth2019>



Despite of the artistic goal that Abramović wants to reach for herself, her audience and her students, one could ask if aiming to reach and change the consciousness of humanity on energetic level might be a big bite even for an artist like Marina Abramović? One cannot say that Abramović's method necessarily belongs to some kind of new age approach of "want to heal and be a holy healer" that we can nowadays find in fancy New Yorker yoga studios, raw and organic food restaurants, expensive minerals stores or self-made Ayahuasca ceremonies around Europe. As already mentioned, Abramović includes all those elements since here early work. The question is rather if this kind of spiritual and *slow art*, as a collective practice, has enough potential to change our society and culture? If we search for answers by looking at the slow food movement that actually has the similar goals as Abramović's spiritual art (changing the collective awareness with respect to climate change, mass food production, a sustainable environment, religious fundamentalism, conscious consumption, etc.) we can only hope for the best. Is it really enough to become slow, empty, alone and calm?

Nevertheless, Abramović's asceticism can be partially seen as a critique to modern western consumption world. In one of her latest interviews she says: "We are so overly consumed by food that we lose the ability to taste". Considering the actual statistics, we can take this statement literally: in the Western society nowadays more people die from overweight than from hunger. We are indeed consumed by food that industrial countries massively produce. This symptom of our contemporary culture was a motive for a broad variety of art work, to mention only a few: Italian movie director Pier Paolo Pasolini demonstrated this in his movie *La Ricotta* (1963); whereas in France, Marco Ferreri articulated his critique in his classic *La grande bouffe* (1973). Our capitalist society is fed up and it is no wonder that we long for the practices of emptying. But, the Belgian novelist Amélie Nothomb shows in her novel *Life form* that the asceticism today could change its direction from emptying into filling.¹⁵ What would it look like, if we would say no to all diet rules, beauty dictates and mass consumption and would express our political protest by striking not with hunger, but with overeating?

4. After the separation from her partner and colleague Ulay, Abramović continued her solo career. After working on object installations called *Transitory Objects*, Abramović came back to performance art at the beginning of the 1990s. The most important work at that point of her career, a work that brought her a prize at Biennale in Venice in 1997, was *Balkan Baroque*. It was in a way a continuation of her two-hours live-performance *Cleaning the House* from 1995. In *Balkan Baroque* the artist sits amidst an enormous pile of bones (1500 kilos), washing them one by one (6 hours per day!) while singing folk songs from her childhood. The installation included three silent video projections, interviews Abramović did with her mother and father, which convey themes of violence and trauma from Yugoslavian resent conflict past. Also here, Abramović creates a ritual of washing, chanting, mourning. Trough performative repetition of this ritual a transformative space is created, and death becomes knowable and approachable.

¹⁵ Nothomb, A., 2013, *Life form*, New York.



Fig. 4 – *Balkan Baroque* (1997)

The purification ‘to the bone’ doesn’t stand here for the processing of Abramović’s private experiences of lost from her past. It is rather a performance about Yugoslavian past *per se*, a piece about the collective past, and it had the intention to have universal significance.¹⁶ *Balkan Baroque* was an example *par excellence* for an artwork influenced by *memorial turn* – a cultural phenomenon that appeared in nineties after the fall of communism in Europe. *Memorial turn* brought the wish for producing the memory, which Abramović started doing during the nineties, not only on collective level, but also on personal.¹⁷ In 1995 she created a film framed video installation called *The Onion*. The camera pans in close on Abramović who is holding an oversized onion. She chomps voraciously into it and slowly devours the entire onion. As she eats the pain becomes intense, her eyes water, but she continues eating nevertheless, while declaiming that she is tired of many things – taking planes, waiting for things, making decisions, falling in love with wrong men, and being ashamed of her nose being too big, of her ass being too large, ashamed about the war in Yugoslavia.

¹⁶ Pejić, B., 2017, *Erinnern wir uns jetzt...an Jugoslawien*. In: *Marina Abramović. The Cleaner*, Berlin, p. 248.

¹⁷ Pejić, p. 243.



Fig. 5 – *The Onion* (1995)

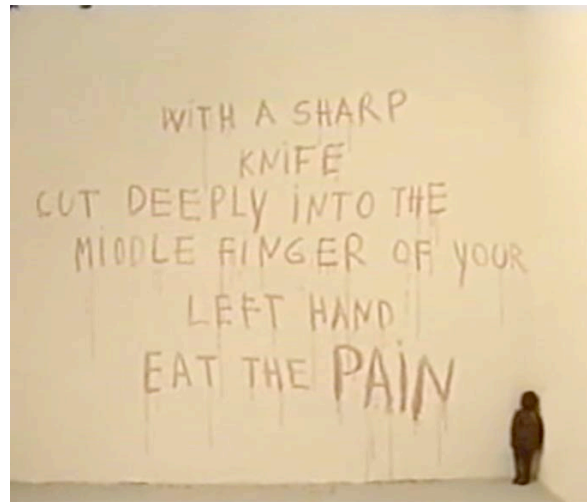


Fig. 6 – *Spirit Cooking* (1997)

The Onion was made in the same year than the idiosyncratic piece *Spirit Cooking* that culminated in an installation of violent instructions painted in pig's blood on the white walls of the Zerynthia Associazione per l'Arte Contemporanea in Rome, in 1997. Few years after *Spirit Cooking*, together with Marco Anelli Abramović creates a series of photographs called *The Kitchen* (2009), dedicated to Saint Therese of Ávila. The photographs are taken in an abandoned kitchen in the former Spanish orphanage La Laboral in Gijón. The writings of Saint Therese of Ávila, a 16th-century nun who was said to have levitated in church and once – to her annoyance – in her kitchen while making soup, is cited as inspiration for the series. Therefore the photographs show Abramović wearing a black long dress, looking like nun, levitating over the kitchen, cooking the soup or just posing around the big pots. Abramović works with essentials, setting fragments, trying not change the historic place, but through the presence of her body to re-read and translate it; to keep its story alive, but at the same time to make her own out of it.

Although born as an homage to Saint Teresa, the work became above all autobiographical. As the artist states: “In my childhood the kitchen of my grandmother was the centre of my world: all the stories were told in the kitchen, all the pieces of advice regarding my life were given in the kitchen, all the future-telling through the cups of black coffee took place in the kitchen, so it was really the centre of the world, and all my best memories come from there”¹⁸. *The Kitchen. Homage to Saint Therese* produces Abramović's personal memories, pointing to the importance of the grandmother Milica, who was a devout Christian and of the kitchen as a place where the spiritual world and the daily world met and mixed. The complete work expresses meditative tranquility, great intensity and spirituality.

¹⁸ Abramović, M., 2017, *Walk through walls: A Memoir*, Munich.



Fig. 7 – The Kitchen (2009)

Maybe we could follow Abramović blindly in her preaches about spiritual asceticism, energy flows and food for soul. But it is disturbing when we get the news that the same Abramović develops in cooperation with New Yorker company Kreëmart sugar overloaded French macarons (synthesis of sugar, water and food coloring) that taste like her and are available to buy only in fancy shops. It also almost offends our tolerance towards Abramović when we read that she created together with the commercial coffee brand Illy a poster for 50th Barcolana sailing regatta in the Gulf of Trieste, promoting respect for the environment by using the slogan “We’re all in the same boat”. How does Illy and environment



fit together and where should an artist put the ethic line when choosing sponsors, Maecenas or collaborators?

Consumerism of western society is aggressively targeting our bellies, filling us until when we can't feel and move anymore, while the other side of the world is starving from hunger. The gap between emptiness and fullness becomes wider, just like the gap between poor and rich. The metabolic imbalance is accompanied by different food disorders, food trends and diets. What Abramović tries to reach with her work (except her ambiguous commercial work) is to awake some sort of general awareness for this imbalance between natural needs (food) and cultural habits (ritual) in order to create a space *in-between* where the production and consumption of immaterial art is possible, which on a collective level could lead to transformation of mind. Demonstrating this using the food as medium shouldn't only stay present in the field of art. Couldn't this become a universal key for understanding and stabilizing the rickety balance of our society between taking and giving, particularly as all eating practices are based on this metabolic principle.

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Image Sources

- Fig. 1. *Thomas Lips* (1975), In: Stoos, Toni and Abramović, Marina, *Artist Body; Performances 1968-1998*. Mailand, 1998. p. 100.
- Fig. 2. *Nightsea Crossing* (1982) In: Stoos, Toni and Abramović, Marina, *Artist Body; Performances 1968-1998*. Mailand, 1998. p. 268, 269.
- Fig. 3. *The House with the Ocean View* (2012/2017), *The Cleaner. Marina Abramović*. Berlin, 2017. p. 189.
- Fig. 4. *Balkan Baroque* (1997), In: Stoos, Toni and Abramović, Marina, *Artist Body; Performances 1968-1998*. Mailand, 1998. p. 368, 369.
- Fig. 5. *The Onion* (1995), In: Stoos, Toni, Abramović, Marina, *Artist Body; Performances 1968-1998*. Mailand, 1998. p. 345.
- Fig. 6. *Spirit Cooking* (1997), a screenshot from the youtube video: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=g9ys-Lfu4Sc>, last time visited on May 15th, 11:23.
- Fig. 7. *The Kitchen* (2009), In: Abramović, Marina and Feijeoo, Mateo, *The Kitchen. Homage to Saint Therese*. Madrid, 2012. p. 18, 19.

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