

João Pedro Cachopo

## The Diva is Present: Some Thoughts on Marina Abramović's *7 Deaths of Maria Callas* (2020)

*Presence almost belongs to the discourse of icons. [...] Artists are not saints, but there is certainly a sense in which the question of their presence in a performance has at least a resonance in the metaphysics of art.*

A. Danto, *Abramović: The Artist is Present*

*I was always thinking that art was a kind of question between life and death, and some of my performances really included the possibility of dying, you know, during the piece; it could happen.*

M. Abramović, *Marina Abramović: Artist Body*

*Nobody can double Callas!*

The Rome Opera management (1958)

### 1.

Almost half a century after the death of Maria Callas (1923-1977), the myth of the singer persists. In fact, looking at recent years, it seems to intensify. Books, documentaries, exhibitions, shows and tributes continue to proliferate. Furthermore, unprecedented projects emerge, in which the use of new media takes the lead: a virtual duet of Maria Callas and Angela Gheorghiu singing the “Habanera” in Gheorghiu’s recital-disc *Homage to Callas* (2011); an immersive exhibition about Callas’s life and work, *Maria by Callas*, curated by Tom Volf for La Seine Musicale (2017); *Callas in Concert*, a live show with a hologram of the singer produced by BASE Hologram (2018-2020)<sup>1</sup> – all of these projects bear witness to the entrance of the Callas myth in the digital age.

<sup>1</sup> For a closer, in-depth analysis of these projects see C. Cenciarelli, *The Limits of Operatic Deadness: Bizet, ‘Habanera’ (Carmen), Act I*, in “Cambridge Opera Journal”, vol. 28, n.

It is against this background that I will address *7 Deaths of Maria Callas* (2020), an operatic project by Marina Abramović with music by Marko Nikodijević (interspersed with arias by Verdi, Puccini, Bizet, Donizetti and Bellini), videos by Nabil Elderkin and Marco Brambilla, costumes by Riccardo Tisci, sets by Anna Schöttl and text by Petter Skavlan and Abramović herself. Crossing different arts and media, *7 Deaths of Maria Callas* re-enacts the deaths of seven female characters from seven famous operas. In the end, an eighth death is added: the death of Maria Callas. It is in this eighth scene, which reproduces the circumstances of the soprano's last moments in her Parisian apartment in 1977, that Marina Abramović, embodying Callas, intervenes as a performance artist on stage. Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, the premiere of the show, initially scheduled for April 2020, had to be postponed. It took place on September 1, 2020, at the Bayerisches Staatsoper in Munich, with Yoel Gamzou conducting the theatre's orchestra. Five days later, the show was broadcast live on Staatsooper.tv, in cooperation with BR-Klassik and ARTE concert.

My purpose in this article is twofold. On the one hand, I aim to discuss some of the themes evoked by this project: the tensions between opera and performance art; the variety of way in which liveness and remediation intersect; the trope of the female protagonist's death in opera. On the other hand, taking as a starting point the emphasis on the artist's presence on stage – a crucial aspect of Abramović's work – I will seek to show how *7 Deaths of Maria Callas* embodies and manifests a paradox that runs through many of the recent projects around Maria Callas: on the one hand, the fascination with the multiplication of images, doubles, copies, avatars and media; on the other hand, the obsession with the values of originality: authenticity, liveness and presence. It is this paradox, which tells us a great deal about the anxieties and expectations of our age, that I seek to illuminate in this article.

## 2.

The presence of the artist-performer is crucial in *7 Deaths of Maria Callas*. This is evident throughout the entire spectacle but becomes outstandingly apparent towards the end. The show culminates in a kind of apotheosis. In a resplendent golden dress, Abramović reappears – the curtain has already fallen, although the show has not yet ended – to face the audience. Simultaneously, and for the first time in the show, we hear

the recorded voice of Callas, singing “Casta Diva” from Bellini’s *Norma*. The diva is present. But who is the diva? Callas or Abramović?



Fig. 1

Marina Abramović in the final scene of *7 Deaths of Maria Callas*

Before we address this question, it is necessary to provide a more detailed description of the work. Strongly emphasizing the connection between the stage and the screen, the first part of *7 Deaths of Maria Callas* evokes the deaths of seven female characters from seven famous operas: Verdi’s *La traviata*, Puccini’s *Tosca*, Verdi’s *Otello*, Puccini’s *Madama Butterfly*, Bizet’s *Carmen*, Donizetti’s *Lucia di Lammermoor* and Bellini’s *Norma*. A different singer performs an aria from each opera live, while a video by Nabil Elderkin is projected on a large screen at the back of the stage. Thus, there are seven videos in which Marina, sometimes alone and sometimes acting alongside Willem Dafoe, embodies seven deaths under the sign of “consumption” (*Violetta*), “jumping” (*Tosca*), “strangulation” (*Desdemona*), “hara-kiri” (*Cio-Cio San*), “knifing” (*Carmen*), “madness” (*Lucia*), and “burning” (*Norma*)<sup>2</sup>. It could be said that

<sup>2</sup> The arias by Verdi, Puccini, Bizet, Donizetti and Bellini are performed by Hera Hyesang Park (“Addio, del passato” from *La traviata*’s Act III), Whitney Morrison (“Vissi d’arte” from *Tosca*’s Act II), Leah Hawkins (“Ave Maria” from *Otello*’s Act IV), Gabriella Reyes (“Un bel dì” from *Madama Butterfly*’s Act II), Nadezhda Karyazina (“L’amour est un oiseau rebelle” from *Carmen*’s Acto I), Adela Zaharia (“Il dolce suono” from *Lucia di Lammermoor*’s Act III) e Selene Zanetti (“Casta Diva” from *Norma*’s Act I).

these are seven nightmares of Callas, who remains lying, in the person of Abramović, on a low bed to the right of the stage.



Fig. 2

Abramović e Dafoe embodying Carmen and José on screen, while Nadezhda Karyazina sings “L’amour est un oiseau rebelle” on stage

To these seven deaths, an eighth is added: the death of Maria Callas. The second part of the show begins, which portrays the singer’s death in her Parisian apartment in a quite realistic way, reproduced in a quite realistic way by the set design, in 1977. It is in this second moment that Abramović intervenes more directly in the show, following her own recorded voice, which either guides, describes or questions the artist’s bodily movements and states. It’s as if we are hearing her thoughts:

Breathe. Breathe. Breathe. Swallow. Throat feels velvet. The weight of my feet against the soft mattress, ankles, calves, thighs, back, shoulders, arms, neck and head... [...] Scent of my hair. Lavender. Metallic taste of unbrushed teeth. [...] Did I sleep? Morning? Where is my breakfast?<sup>3</sup>

After getting up from the bed, Abramović walks around the room, sits back down, and looks at photographs. These slow and deliberate movements culminate in her death, symbolically punctuated by the shattering of a jar and the commotion of the orchestra. At that moment, Mari(n) a leaves the stage; the seven maidens re-enter – the singers, dressed in

<sup>3</sup> M. Abramović, *7 Deaths of Maria Callas*, Damiani, Bologna 2020, p. 165.

aprons, from the previous nightmares, who, as Bruna would have done, systematically tidy up the room, sweeping, cleaning and covering the objects with black veils.



*Fig. 3*  
Abramović in the second part of *7 Deaths of Maria Callas*

It is throughout the second part that we listen to most of Marko Nikodijević's music. We also owe him the introduction and the six interludes that unite the seven preceding scenes. A quick note on these interludes: Marco Brambilla directed the videos that accompany them, in which we see a sky that becomes increasingly black and stormy. Crossing through the darkness, the recorded voice of Marina Abramović recites texts of enigmatic nature, which allude to the singularity of the character, strength, and destiny of those seven women. Let us see an example, alluding to Cio-Cio San:

In science, the butterfly has given name to an effect in which small causes lead to unpredictable consequences. In superstition, the butterfly is your beloved coming to see you. In mythology, the butterfly is a human soul; whether they be living, dying, or already dead.<sup>4</sup>

And would Violetta, Floria, Desdemona, Cio-Cio San, Carmen, Lucia and Norma not have so much in common with Maria and Marina? The

<sup>4</sup> Ivi, p. 73.

interplay of fiction and reality, leading to the intuition that there are fictions more real than reality, is the ultimate bet of the work. To succeed in deploying it, however, this opera-performance depends on the combination of a variety of intertextual and intermedial strategies.

### 3.

Here's the irony: that a show like this – so full of mediations, in which the artist's presence is divided between the stage and the screen, in which we see videos made using green screens, in which we hear the recorded voices of Abramović and Callas, in which, in short, the underlying machinery of what happens “here and now” requires the ingenuity and art of the most advanced audio-visual technique – was conceived and realized *precisely* by Abramović.

In fact, whatever we may think of the artist's work – thus, regardless of whether we are part of her entourage of inveterate admirers or whether we join the trend, which is now quite widespread, that recognizes her initial contributions, full of daring and future, but turns up the nose at her more recent work – we will recognize that her name has become and remains an emblem of performance art. An art that cannot be rehearsed, repeated, fixed; an art that, in Arthur Danto words, also provided a way of being an artist that was “liberating, immediate, dangerous, and thrilling”<sup>5</sup>.

If there is, in fact, art in which the value of the artist's presence is accentuated, in which the risks of interaction with the public are assumed, and in which the limits of the body are tested, and, last but not least, in which all this happens “here and now”, such art is performance art. It is this art that Marina Abramović is the emblem of<sup>6</sup>, in a trajectory that began about half a century ago with works like *Rhythm 0* (1974) and *Thomas Lips* (1975), which went through a long collaboration with Ulay (the name by which Frank Uwe Laysiepen is known), of which *Imponderabilia* (1977), *Rest Energy* (1980), and *The Lovers* (1988) are emblematic, and which culminated, already in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, with *The Home with the Ocean View* (2002) and *The Artist is Present* (2010).

This having been said, how is it possible that Abramović has decided to create an opera-performance? Before addressing this question, which will lead me to emphasize that the main motive of this project is the fascination with Callas, and not so much the attraction to opera, I would like to

<sup>5</sup> A. Danto, *Abramović: The Artist is Present*, MOMA, New York 2010, p. 29.

<sup>6</sup> See M. Israel, *The Big Picture: Contemporary Art in 10 Works by 10 Artists*, Prestel, Munich, London-New York 2017, pp. 124-139.

discuss, in a potentially relevant detour in an article that discusses the paradox of the fascination with reproduction and the obsession with originality, what separates and what brings together opera and performance.

#### 4.

At first glance, everything seems to set opera apart from performance. On one side, there is an art form whose tradition seems inseparable, in its institutional, social and political dimensions, from an entrenched and undisguised conservatism. On the other side, there is an art form – a constellation of artistic practices – whose *raison d'être* consists precisely of transgressing tradition, shaking conventions, breaking barriers, disturbing and unsettling. Nonetheless, performance and opera have at least one thing in common: the event of performance, in its unique, ephemeral and irreproducible character.

Certainly, opera and performance bring this “event” to life in different ways. Performance goes much further in exploring unpredictability and risk. And it involves a more radical commitment to the interaction with the audience and the testing of the limits of the body and mind. Opera, on the other hand, like dance, theatre and music, relies heavily on the conventions of the performance hall, which, though mutable, ensure a significant degree of distance between the audience and the performers; furthermore, opera is an art form that is rehearsed, an art of representation and repetition. Despite these contrasts, in both cases – and this is far from a negligible point of convergence – everything is at stake in a “here and now” whose singular intensity cannot be overlooked. The bodily element also contributes to this intensity: let us not forget, in this comparison between opera and performance, the degree of physical commitment involved in operatic performance – especially in the case of singers.

As we know, the history of performance art is quite recent. Although its roots date back to the modernist movements of the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, its emergence, in dialogue with conceptualism and post-minimalism, occurred in the 1960s and 1970s. For a first wave, full with consequences for the art world, the works of pioneering artists such as Bruce Nauman, Lynda Benglis, Joseph Beuys, Chris Burden, Ana Mendieta, Nam June Paik, Hannah Wilke, Gilbert & George, Carolee Schneemann, Vito Accontini and, of course, Marina Abramović made invaluable contributions.

In this recent history, there is an aspect that is worth remembering in this context. Interestingly, given the emphasis on the radical unrepeatability and unpredictability of the actions carried out, whether called performances or happenings, the institutional recognition of performance art was closely related to photography and video. These media alone allowed for

the documentation, preservation and study of past performances<sup>7</sup>. From this perspective, performance art and the performing arts – not only opera but also theatre, music and dance – as well as the theoretical and critical discourses that accompany them, have something else in common: a love-hate relationship with the technical reproducibility of sound and image.



Fig. 4  
Gina Pane, *The Conditioning* (1973)

On the one hand, the reputation, dissemination and institutionalization of the works of performance artists depend on photography and video. The same can be said about the performing arts in general and opera in particular: how to appreciate the merits of a vocal performance, a new production or a world premiere, when it is not possible to attend the live performance, without audio-visual recording or transmission technologies? On the other hand, the discourses that invest in the specificity of both performance art and the performing arts emphasize, as their distinctive feature, the radical ephemerality of the events that constitute them and whose experience, in its “authenticity,” would be unsuitable for reproduction<sup>8</sup>.

<sup>7</sup> A. Danto, *op. cit.*, pp. 29-31; M. Israel, *op. cit.*, pp. 138-139.

<sup>8</sup> This is the position taken by diverse theorists. See A. Carolyn, *Music – Drastic or Gnostic?*, in “Critical Inquiry”, n. 3, 2004, pp. 505-536; P. Phelan, *Unmarked: The Politics of Performance*, Routledge, London-New York 1996; H. U. Gumbrecht, *Production of Presence: What Meaning Cannot Convey*, Stanford University Press, Stanford 2003.

Marina Abramović's position in the context of these practices and debates is interestingly ambiguous. In general terms, the artist insists on presence, the body, danger, and finally, the irreducible unpredictability of what may happen at the moment of the performance<sup>9</sup>. On the other hand, not only did she encourage the use of video in the documentation and preservation of her works, but she also embraced another practice (which further aligns her work with the performing arts): "re-performance" – that is, the "repetition," "representation" or "recreation" of past performances.

In *Seven Easy Pieces*, a series of performances presented by Abramović at the Guggenheim Museum in New York in November 2005, the artist "re-performed" seven previous pieces, not only her own (*Lips of Thomas* [1975] and *Entering the Other Side* [2005]) but also those of other artists: Bruce Nauman (*Body Pressure* [1974]), Vito Acconci (*Seedbed* [1972]), Valie Export (*Action Pants: Genital Panic* [1969]), Gina Pane (*The Conditioning* [1973]), and Joseph Beuys (*How to Explain Pictures to a Dead Hare* [1965]). Commenting on this project in an interview with McEvelley, Abramović states: "I want to do a series of classical performances by performance artists from the 1970s, but I will do them, like a musician playing Mozart many years later". Without a doubt, the artist is aware that the practice of re-performance draws performance art closer to the performing arts.



Fig. 5

Abramović reperforming *The Conditioning* (1973) by Gina Pane in 2005

<sup>9</sup> See M. Abramović, *Marina Abramović: Artist Body*, ed. by E. Bellioni, Edizioni Charta, Milan 1998.

Five years later, at the MOMA retrospective, titled, just like the performance that was at its centre, *The Artist is Present*, five past performances by the artist were re-performed by a series of other artists who had previously worked with Abramović.



Fig. 6

Arna Sam and Hsiao Chen re-performing *Relation in Time* by Abramović and Ulay

In light of these facts, it is fair to say that Abramović, despite being, as she jokingly suggested, the “grandmother of performance art,” is far from being a “helicopter parent” – overprotective of the boundaries of her art, quick to denounce technological contaminations and vigilant in policing artistic deviations. *7 Deaths of Maria Callas* is a testament to this attitude. In fact, this is a work that, not only for flirting with opera but also for relying on hybridization and technology, has the potential to frustrate both “opera purists,” who were generally unconvinced by this tribute to Callas, and “performance purists”.

The documentation and re-performance of past works would be one thing – debatable but still acceptable, some stricter critics may claim. But Abramović goes further in this project. She abandons improvisation and interaction: at each new performance, the artist must move similarly, repeat what she rehearsed, act, perform, represent... As if this weren't enough, the video is part and parcel of the work, showing us Abramović and Dafoe portraying operatic characters. In the midst of these “duplica-

tions,” “reproductions” and “representations,” what happens to the *original* ephemerality, unrepeatability or unpredictability of performance? Has Abramović betrayed the essential principles of the art of presence?

## 5.

Let’s be clear: despite Abramović’s interest in a dialogue with the performing arts,<sup>10</sup> the main motive behind *7 Deaths of Maria Callas* was the admiration for Callas. The idea of creating a work around the singer has been with Abramović for many years. However, according to her initial idea, the project would take a very different form. It was already a project around the “seven deaths” of Maria Callas, but it was not an opera. The original idea was to collaborate, not with a composer and a videographer, but with seven filmmakers, including Pedro Almodóvar and Roman Polanski, who would make seven opera films in which – this part of the project has not changed – Abramović would embody the female characters<sup>11</sup>. Thus, it is important to acknowledge that the starting idea was not to make an opera, but to develop a video-performance work, whose presentation, to take place in an exhibition space, would be closer to an installation than to a musical-theatrical performance.

Regarding the genesis and purpose of *7 Deaths of Maria Callas*, Abramović writes in the introduction to the show’s book-album the following:

For thirty-one years, I have wanted to make a work dedicated to the life and art of Maria Callas.

I have read all of her biographies, listened to her extraordinary voice and watched her on film. A saggitarius, like me, I have always been fascinated by her personality, her life – and her death. Like so many of the characters she created on stage, she died for love. She died from a broken heart.

Most operas end with the woman dying and more often than not, it is because of love. She will leap from precipices, burn, be strangulated, stabbed or simply go mad.

I want to reenact the death scenes from seven operas – seven deaths that

<sup>10</sup> This dialogue with the performing arts has also taken an experimental dimension. *Goldberg*, a project developed by Abramović in collaboration with pianist Igor Levit and presented at the Park Avenue Armory in New York between December 7 and 19, 2015, is a good example. In this case, the audience was invited to remain silent for half an hour, sitting on lounge chairs with headphones on (in order to isolate any ambient sound) before the pianist started playing. This gave the moment of live listening the centrality that only a frame of visual and auditory quietness would allow.

<sup>11</sup> See S. Goudona, *Dramatic Architectures: Places of Drama – Drama for Places*, ed. by Maria Helena Maia, Jorge Palinhos, Centro de Estudos Arnaldo Araújo (Escola Superior do Porto) 2014.

Maria Callas has died before me.<sup>12</sup>

On the previous page, two photographs – one of Callas and one of Abramović – with their faces resting on their hands.



Fig. 7

The diptych of Callas e Abramović photographs and the artist's introduction in the album-book

*7 Deaths of Maria Callas* | © Marco Anelli

Instead of deploring the somewhat clichéd tone of Abramović's presentation, it is worth to take a closer look at this pair of photographs and to compare them with two others: the photograph of Marina's face reflected in a broken mirror (a photograph taken from Lucia's film, which incidentally serves as the cover of the book-album [Fig. 8]) and the photograph of Marina holding a torn photograph of Maria, in a composition that juxtaposes the two faces, showing them as if they were the two halves of a single image (a photograph that is often used in materials related to the show [Fig. 9]).

<sup>12</sup> M. Abramović, *7 Deaths*, cit., p. 11.

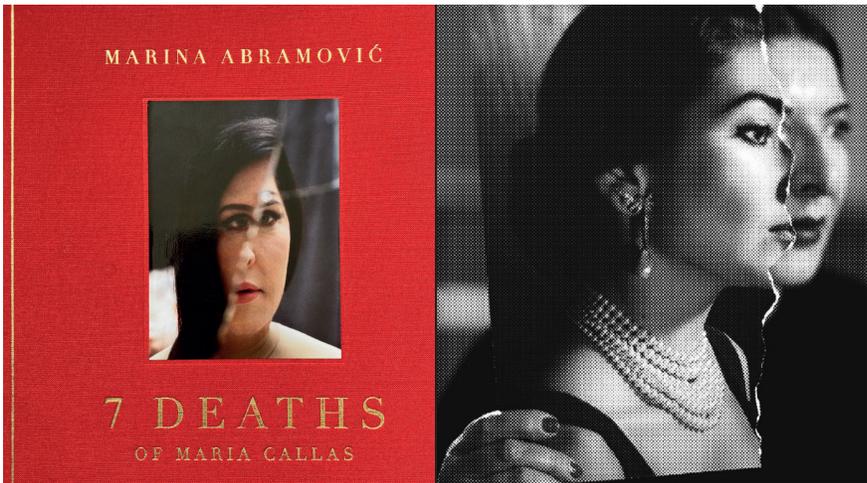


Fig. 8-9

Photographs of Marina Abramović for *7 Deaths of Maria Callas* | © Marco Anelli

Fascination and identification go hand in hand in *7 Deaths of Maria Callas*. These photographs illustrate it. It is as if from the hollow interior of Abramović's shattered image (Fig. 8) emerges the void that the "mirror play" with Callas fills. Maria and Marina complement each other; they are the negative of each other that the two juxtaposed pictures, with white and black backgrounds, suggest (Fig. 7); Maria subtly looks down towards the camera; Marina subtly looks up towards Callas. However, in the photograph of Abramović with Callas's picture (Fig. 9), it is Marina who appears to place her hand on Maria's shoulder, as if comforting and supporting her predecessor.

Abramović was certainly not the first admirer of Maria Callas without a special taste for opera. Tom Volf, who carried out the *Maria by Callas* project, which included an exhibition, a documentary and a number of publications, or Lyndsy Spence, who wrote the most recent and buzzed-about biography of Callas, *Cast a Diva: The Hidden Life of Maria Callas* (2021), also fell in love with the singer – with her voice, her presence, her character – without any prior curiosity or interest in the art of *bel canto*. In this respect, Michal Grover-Friedlander is right when she argues that in this operatic project "Abramović asserts her longtime affinity and identification, indeed infatuation, with singer Maria Callas, but not with opera", concluding that "for her [Abramović], opera appears above all to be traditional, conventional, and stagnant, while Callas is electrifying"<sup>13</sup>.

<sup>13</sup> M. Grover-Friedlander, *Thoughts on Marina Abramović's 7 Deaths of Maria Callas*, in

However, it is worth going further. For Abramović, and only thus can we understand that fascination mingles with affinity and identification, the focus is not only on the voice, the presence or the character of the singer. It is not Callas, but the myth of Callas – the myth of the woman-artist who risks her life in art – that triggers the irresistible attraction. Callas – who lived for love on the “stage of life” with the same intensity as she lived it on the “stage of art”... Callas – who so often complained that too many commitments consumed her vital energy... Callas – who went on a slimming diet whose details remain an enigma today... All this, not just Callas’s personality on the one hand or her artistic qualities on the other hand, but the way they come together in the myth, fascinated Abramović.

Marina and Maria, therefore, do not only share the same zodiac sign, certain facial characteristics, a strained relationship with their parents, or even the experience of a heart-breaking love affair. Abramović refers to all these aspects in various texts and interviews<sup>14</sup>. However, their ultimate affinity consists – Abramović seems to believe – in a total commitment to art that entails the danger of death<sup>15</sup>. From this point of view, it makes no sense to accuse the artist of abandoning risk in this operatic project. The challenges and trials may not be the same as in other performances by the artist – the times of *Rhythm 0* or *Rhythm 5* are long gone – but on a symbolic level, the bet on danger has never been so unconditional.

## 6.

The death of women in opera is the theme of Catherine Clément’s *Opéra, ou la défaite des femmes* (1979), a work whose influence is still felt today. In the beginning was a perplexity: here is a genre – opera – whose canon includes a set of works that recurrently represent, in a spectacular way, the death of the female character. It could be said, rightly, that there are exceptions. It could be said, rightly, that these are fictions. It could be said, rightly, that the music often suggests other readings. None of this convinces or appeases Clément. For the essayist, it is clear and unsettling that the pleasure provided by a wide

“Review Colloquy: *7 Deaths of Maria Callas* (Live stream from the Bayerische Staatsoper, Munich, September 2020)”, ed. by N. Stevens, in “The Opera Quarterly”, vol. 36, n. 1-2, 2020, pp. 81-86.

<sup>14</sup> See E. Steer, “Talking Trash: Digging the Dirt with Marina Abramović”, 2022, <https://elephant.art/talking-trash-digging-the-dirt-with-marina-abramovic-23092022/>.

<sup>15</sup> See T. McEvelley, *Marina Abramović: Artist Body*, ed. Emanuela Bellioni, Edizioni Charta, Milan 1998, p. 15.

range of operatic works is inseparable from stories in which the heroine “triumphs” at the price of suffering, torment and death. Here is an enlightening passage:

Opera concerns women. No, there is no feminist version; no, there is no liberation. Quite the contrary: they suffer, they cry, they die. Singing and wasting your breath can be the same thing. Glowing with tears their décolletés cut to the heart, they expose themselves to the gaze of those who come to take pleasure in their pretend agonies. No tone of them escapes with her life, or very few of them do.<sup>16</sup>

Authors of diverse backgrounds have challenged Clément’s ideas. Carolyn Abbate and Paul Robinson, for example, criticized Clément for her logo-centrism – for focusing her analysis exclusively on the libretto<sup>17</sup>. For both, when weighing the tragic fate of these operatic heroines, their vocal triumph cannot be undervalued, let alone ignored. I’m not interested in taking sides in this controversy. Instead, I want to ponder the affinity that may or may not exist between Clément’s critical endeavour and Abramović’s operatic project.

On the one hand, there is no doubt that *7 Deaths of Maria Callas*, revolving around seven operatic deaths, is close to the intuition that runs through *Opéra, ou la défaite des femmes*. In fact, it seems to confirm it: it was not at all difficult to find seven crucial operas in Callas’s career that ended with the death of the protagonist. On the other hand, the point of Clément’s book is not only to expose the prevalence of female death in the operatic genre. It is not simply a matter of observing, but rather, and fundamentally, of denouncing and repudiating the fact that the death of women appears to be the alpha and omega of the operatic genre. Now, there are no traces of denunciation or repudiation in *7 Deaths of Maria Callas*. On the contrary, the spectacle seems to succumb to the temptation to aestheticize those deaths – to transform the glimpse of suffocation, vertigo, blood and, last but not least, fire into the sublime.

<sup>16</sup> C. Clément, *Opera, or The Undoing of Women* [*L’opéra ou la défaite des femmes*, 1979], trans. by B. Wing, University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis 1988, p. 11.

<sup>17</sup> See C. Abbate, *Unsung Voices: Opera and Musical Narrative in the Nineteenth Century*, Princeton University Press, Princeton 1991; P. Robinson, *It’s not over until the soprano dies*, in “New York Times”, January 1, 1989.



Fig. 9  
Still of the *Norma* film by Nabil Elderkin

It is no coincidence that the seventh and final death is that of Norma. The scene in Elderkin's film evokes *Rhythm 5* (1974), a performance in which Abramović, surrounded by flames and soon deprived of oxygen, fainted, being saved by a spectator who noticed the situation and promptly removed her from the scene. Thus, it is also no coincidence that the dress chosen by Abramović for her triumphant re-entry at the end of the show is the Tisci piece worn by Dafoe in the film. The cross-dressing gives food for thought. Would the woman assume the lead role without ceasing to be a victim of violence? In fact, just like Norma, who swaps clothes with Pollione, Carmen also dresses up as a bullfighter. However, that doesn't stop José from treating her as if she were the bull, wrapping her up and tying her down. In any case, this is certainly true in the *Norma* video: the golden colour of the dress does not just match the glow of glory; it also rhymes with the flames of sacrifice.

## 7.

Given the clues it offers, the book-album of *7 Deaths of Maria Callas* – from which the still of Elderkin's seventh video and the discussed photographs of Callas and/or Abramović come – deserves some comments. A lavish publication by Damiani, printed on the best paper and with the best binding, the volume resembles more an exhibition catalog than a traditional opera program. It includes the cast of the Munich production, the artist's presentation text and the script of the show, written by

Abramović and Skavlan. A series of images is added, including stills from Elderkin's and Brambilla's videos. That being said, what really stands out are the photographs by Marco Anelli.

In the chapter dedicated to Norma, between the initial image of Brambilla's video and the final image of Elderkin's video, the green prevails. Not the green of nature, but the green of artificiality: the green screen used during shooting. Anelli's photographs, instead of displaying details of the performance or rehearsals in the theatre, capture moments of video filming. The book, in this regard, provides a kind of making-of. We see Abramović, suspended over a mattress, with her hair blowing in the wind from a fan, for the Tosca jumping scene (*Fig. 10*); an assistant touching up her makeup for the Desdemona strangulation scene; Willem rehearsing a pose in front of the camera (for the Norma and Pollione emulation scene).



*Fig. 10*

The Tosca film in the making | © Marco Anelli

Based on this description, one would assume that the photographs have a demystifying effect: they would show, in their unadorned simplicity, the gears of the show. Although seductive, this reading slips in the careful observation of Anelli's photographs. Instead of abolishing the fourth wall, revealing the mechanisms of production, they transform it into a showcase. It is the aesthetic of fashion – of fashion photography – that also prevails here. Tisci's dresses do not shine any less in Anelli's

photographs than in Elderkin's videos. The Vogue aesthetic supplements the MTV aesthetic.

If, in fact, we were to compare the spirit of Nabil Elderkin's videos with those that make up Don Boyd's *Aria* (1987) – a set of short films by directors as surprisingly diverse as Robert Altman, Ken Russell and Jean-Luc Godard – a realization would impose itself. Their tone is less that of Godard's irony, who imagines a set of excerpts from Lully's *Armide* in a bodybuilder gym, than that of Franc Roddam's kitsch, in whose version of *Tristan und Isolde's* "Liebestod" two lovers commit suicide, cutting their wrists in a Las Vegas hotel.

## 8.

It is not certain that Marina Abramović is familiar with Boyd's *Aria* or Clément's *Ópera, ou la défaites des femmes*. However, it is certain that she attended a performance of *Tosca* directed by Christophe Honoré at the Festival d'Aix-en-Provence in 2019. On July 12th of that year, at the performance I had the opportunity to attend, there she was, just a few seats away from me, in the magnificent Théâtre de l'Archevêché. When I saw *7 Deaths of Maria Callas* a little over a year later, I had a sense of *air de famille* more than once. I note this, not as a way of questioning the originality of *7 Deaths of Maria Callas*, but on the contrary, as a way of suggesting Abramović's healthy receptivity to influences from the world of the performing arts.

Some of these points of contact – between Honoré's staging and Abramović's performance – seem trivial. One of them was not even realized, despite being in the script-libretto. In the final scene, Abramović was supposed to take out one by one the seven dresses from the previous films, as if she were indecisive about them and eventually chose Norma's dress. Also in *Tosca*, in Honoré's staging, the dresses of Carmen, Salomé and Lucia play an important role. This scene was cut, probably for time-related reasons related to the articulation of music and performance. In any case, it testifies to the desire to connect the film action with the stage action.

To go further on this point, it should be added that the awareness that the show would be experienced not only live, in front of a stage, but also at a distance, in front of a screen – an awareness that is strongly felt in the production of Aix-en-Provence, given the characteristics of Honoré's staging and Philippe Béziat's filming – runs through the conception of *7 Deaths of Maria Callas*. On stage, considering the set and props, we recognize multiple allusions, quotations and references. We see a pictorial representation of Salome hanging on the wall; we recognize a pho-

tograph of Callas and Onassis on the bedside table, and another, among several that the artist takes out of a drawer, of Abramović and Paolo Canevari (the artist's third husband). Even the "Sacred Family", a miniature painting by Giambettino Cignaroli (1706-1770), given to Callas by Giovanni Battista Meneghini, her first husband, in 1947, and which the singer would never leave behind whenever she travelled and wherever she performed, is to be found on stage. Now, all of these elements, which offer so many clues for the interpretation of the show, are only visible on video, thanks to the close-up. It is incredibly difficult, if possible at all, to spot many of them during a live performance in a theatre.

Thus, if there are aspects of *7 Deaths of Maria Callas* that elude the "remediated" viewer-listener (who watches the video of the performance on screen), there are also – and they are far from being irrelevant – aspects that elude the live spectator, who attends the performance in front of a stage." Abramović, apparently, thought of both.

## 9.

From photography and videography to phonography, let's consider the final moments of the show. Before leaving the room, the last maiden approaches a record player and puts on – or pretends to put on – an LP disc. Nikodijević's music gets tangled up in a loop. It's as if the record is scratched. Only then does the curtain fall. Only then does Marina re-enter. Only then does Callas resonate. It is difficult, when listening to the recording of "Casta Diva," performed this time by Callas, not to be swept away by the unmistakable timbre of her voice. Ironically, in a show so centred on presence, it is a recording that captures the singer's vocal uniqueness. It is the copy that gives us a glimpse of the original's charm and power.

Along with the recording, Abramović's gestures are broad and slow; more than an imitation, they constitute an allegory of Callas's presence on stage. Before the audience, the diva lends herself to the cult. The shine of the dress is like a luminous halo around her. We are reminded of the live concert with the hologram of Callas. However, among the many differences between the two projects, there is one that is important to emphasize. Abramović, unlike the hologram, does not pretend to sing. Like a statue, the face and lips of the diva remain motionless. If there is a "fusion" between Maria and Marina, there is, on the other hand, a "caesura" between the opera singer and the performance artist. In this aspect, the copy is deliberately unfaithful.

Suddenly, before the final chord of "Casta Diva," silence, darkness and death fall – as if a technical glitch interrupted the spectacle of pres-

ence. What can we say about this ending and the discomfort it generates? Is presence – with the life of bodies, whose audible and visible traces technology aspires to preserve beyond death – the only “original” of this show?

## 10.

Let’s resume the insight that animates this article. Today, in a way that is particularly apparent in projects surrounding the memory of Maria Callas, the obsession with the original and its instances persists in the midst of and despite the fascination with the multiplication of copies. It is as if Walter Benjamin’s famous prognosis about the decline of aura – which for the German philosopher meant the proliferation of new ways of experiencing and appropriating art occasioned by the rise of technological reproducibility – is at once accurate and inaccurate<sup>18</sup>. On one hand, there is no doubt that we live in a world dominated by digital reproduction and remediation. On the other hand, nostalgia for what would escape mediation, preserving a certain type of purity, immediacy and originality, has not disappeared. This paradox is paradigmatically manifested in *7 Deaths of Maria Callas*. But how does this exactly happen?

At first glance, we would say that the copy takes on the forms of duplication (Marina emulating Callas), representation (Abramović embodying the seven operatic characters) and remediation (not only the projection of the short videos and the reproduction of Callas’s and Abramović’s voices during the performance, but also its filming for transmission or later dissemination). As for the original, we would say that it corresponds to the focus on the artist’s presence. Undoubtedly, *7 Deaths of Maria Callas*, like so many other works by Abramović, emphasizes the intensity and enchantment that come from the artist’s presence.

However, as we have suggested in the previous pages, it is also noticeable that Abramović does not reject the dialogue with other arts and media. Not only has she embraced remediation and re-performance throughout her career, but she has also risked, in this and other projects of recent decades, an approach to the performing arts in which her presence is divided between the stage and the screen. Therefore, Abramović cannot be accused of defending the values of authenticity and originality associated with presence in a dogmatic way.

But that’s also the point: presence is not the only figure of the original

<sup>18</sup> See W. Benjamin, *The Work of Art in the Age of Technological Reproducibility, and Other Writings on Media*, ed. by M. W. Jennings, B. Doherty, T. Y. Levin, Harvard University Press, Cambridge-London 2008.

in this opera-performance. Or, to express the same idea in another way: the truth of presence transcends the dichotomy between the stage and the screen. The true original is life, the life whose intensity, pain and danger only the artist willing to risk their own life is capable of experiencing and conveying. Hence my claim that the true motivation of *7 Deaths of Maria Callas* is neither opera nor Maria Callas – the voice of Callas, the personality of Callas, the art of Callas – but the myth of Callas, whose singularity is expressed in the following insight: Callas does not limit herself to represent Tosca; Callas *is* Tosca, *is* Carmen, *is* Lucia.

This is also how Marina feels about Maria. Throughout the entire show, not only dreaming in the bed or wandering through the Parisian apartment, but also in her final apotheosis, facing the audience, Marina *is* Maria. The diva is present. But this is not just a matter of art. For Abramović, if we take the bait that her opera-performance throws at us, it is a matter of life or death.

## References

- Abbate C., *Music – Drastic or Gnostic?*, in “Critical Inquiry”, n. 3, 2004, pp. 505-536.
- *Unsung Voices: Opera and Musical Narrative in the Nineteenth Century*, Princeton University Press, Princeton 1991.
- Abramović M., *Marina Abramović: Artist Body*, ed. by E. Bellioni, Edizioni Charta, Milan 1998.
- *7 Deaths of Maria Callas*, Damiani, Bologna 2020.
- Benjamin W., *The Work of Art in the Age of Technological Reproducibility, and Other Writings on Media*, ed. by M. W. Jennings, B. Doherty, T. Y. Levin, Harvard University Press, Cambridge-London 2008.
- Cachopo J.-P., *Callas and the Hologram: A (Live) Concert with a (Dead) Diva*, in “Sound Stage Screen”, vol. 2, n. 1, 2022, pp. 5-29.
- Cenciarelli C., *The Limits of Operatic Deadness: Bizet, ‘Habanera’ (Carmen), Act I*, in “Cambridge Opera Journal”, vol. 28, n. 2, pp. 221-226.
- Danto A., *Abramović: The Artist is Present*, MOMA, New York 2010.
- Clément C., *Opera, or The Undoing of Women [L’opéra ou la défaite des femmes, 1979]*, trans. by B. Wing, University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis 1988.
- Goudona S., *Dramatic Architectures: Places of Drama – Drama for Places*, ed. by Maria Helena Maia and Jorge Palinhos, Centro de Estudos Arnaldo Araújo (Escola Superior do Porto) 2014.
- Grover-Friedlander M., *Thoughts on Marina Abramović’s 7 Deaths of Maria Callas*, in “Review Colloquy: 7 Deaths of Maria Callas (Live stream from the Bayerische Staatsoper, Munich, September 2020)”, ed. by N. Stevens, in “The Opera Quarterly”, vol. 36, n. 1-2, 2020, pp. 81-86.
- Gumbrecht H. U., *Production of Presence: What Meaning Cannot Convey*, Stanford University Press, Stanford 2003.

- Israel M., *The Big Picture: Contemporary Art in 10 Works by 10 Artists*, Prestel, Munich, London and New York 2017.
- McEvelley T., *Marina Abramović: Artist Body*, ed. Emanuela Bellioni, Edizioni Charta, Milan 1998.
- Phelan P., *Unmarked: The Politics of Performance*, Routledge, London-New York 1996.
- Robinson P., *It's not over until the soprano dies*, in "New York Times", January 1, 1989.
- Spence L., *Cast a Diva: The Hidden Life of Maria Callas*, The History Press, Gloucestershire 2021.
- Steer E., "Talking Trash: Digging the Dirt with Marina Abramović", 2022, <https://elephant.art/talking-trash-digging-the-dirt-with-marina-abramovic-23092022/>.

## La diva è qui: riflessioni su *7 Deaths of Maria Callas* (2020) di Marina Abramović

A quasi cinquant'anni dalla morte di Maria Callas (1977), il suo mito continua a crescere attraverso tributi tradizionali e progetti multimediali, tra cui installazioni immersive, concerti olografici e duetti postumi. *7 Deaths of Maria Callas* (2020) di Marina Abramović, con musiche di Marko Nikodijević e video di Nabil Elderkin, emerge in questo contesto. Combinando opera, video e performance, l'opera rimette in scena le morti di sette eroine iconiche – Violetta, Tosca, Desdemona, Cio-Cio-San, Carmen, Lucia e Norma – ciascuna cantata dal vivo da un soprano diverso su sfondi video proiettati. I video mostrano Abramović e Willem Dafoe che mettono in scena ogni morte attraverso la “consunzione”, il “salto”, lo “strangolamento”, l’“Hara-Kiri”, l’“accoltellamento”, la “follia” e il “rogo”. Un'ottava scena finale ricrea la morte della Callas nel suo appartamento parigino nel 1977, con Abramović che si esibisce sul palco come suo doppio. Questo articolo ha un duplice scopo: in primo luogo, esplorare le tensioni tra arti performative in generale e *performance art* in senso specifico, dunque le sfide interpretative poste dall'intermedialità e dall'intertestualità e il tropo ricorrente della morte della protagonista femminile nell'opera; e in secondo luogo, dimostrare come *7 Deaths of Maria Callas* rifletta un paradosso più ampio presente nei progetti recenti che ruotano attorno alla cantante: da un lato, il fascino per la moltiplicazione di immagini, doppi, copie, avatar e media; dall'altro, una persistente ossessione per i valori dell'originalità, tra cui autenticità, vitalità e presenza.

PAROLE CHIAVE: Maria Callas, Marina Abramović, Performance, Morte, Intermedialità, Autenticità, Presenza.

### The Diva is Present: Some Thoughts on Marina Abramović's *7 Deaths of Maria Callas* (2020)

Nearly fifty years after Maria Callas's death (1977), her myth continues to grow through both traditional tributes and new media projects, including immersive installations, hologram concerts and posthumous duets. Marina Abramović's *7 Deaths of Maria Callas* (2020), with music by Marko Nikodijević and video by Nabil Elderkin, emerges within this context. Combining opera, video and performance, the work restages the deaths of seven iconic heroines – Violetta, Tosca, Desdemona, Cio-Cio-San, Carmen, Lucia, and Norma – each sung live by a different soprano against projected video backdrops. The videos feature Abramović and Willem Dafoe enacting each death

through “consumption”, “jumping”, “strangulation”, “Hara-Kiri”, “knifing”, “madness” and “burning”. A final, eighth scene recreates Callas’s own death in her Paris apartment in 1977, with Abramović performing on stage as her double. This article has a twofold purpose: first, to explore the tensions between the performing arts and performance art, the interpretative challenges posed by intermediality and intertextuality, and the recurring trope of the female protagonist’s death in opera; and second, to demonstrate how *7 Deaths of Maria Callas* reflects a broader paradox present in recent projects surrounding the singer: on one hand, a fascination with the multiplication of images, doubles, copies, avatars, and media; on the other, an enduring obsession with the values of originality, including authenticity, liveness, and presence.

KEYWORDS: Maria Callas, Abramović, Death, Performance, Immersive.