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**Exploring meaning in silence and art performance:  
a journey through Marina Abramović's work**

DEPARTAMENTO DE LETRAS  
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Cada pessoa é um mundo.  
(Clarice Lispector)

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## **Abstract**

WEINSCHENKER, Simone. MILLER, Inés Kayon de (advisor). **Exploring meaning in silence and art performance: a journey through Marina Abramović's work**. Rio de Janeiro, 2020, 29 p. Monografia – Departamento de Letras, Pontifícia Universidade Católica do Rio de Janeiro.

This paper explores, through Marina Abramović's work, performance art as a powerful multimodal ensemble for meaning-making and social transformation. Through her work, Abramović transforms ritualization, pain, silence, time as well as physical and mental limits into powerful modes to build meaning in partnership with her audience. Special attention is given to her performance 'The Artist is Present' as a motivation to explore silence outside verbal interaction boundaries, leveraging its importance as a mode of communication.

**Key words:** Art performance, Silence, Marina Abramović, Multimodality.

## Resumo

WEINSCHENKER, Simone. MILLER, Inés Kayon de (orientadora). **Explorando significado no silêncio e na performance artística: um passeio através da obra de Marina Abramović**. Rio de Janeiro, 2020, 29 p. Monograph – Departamento de Letras, Pontifícia Universidade Católica do Rio de Janeiro.

Esta monografia explora, através do trabalho de Marina Abramović, a *performance* artística como um poderoso aparato multimodal para a construção de significado e transformação social. Por meio de seu trabalho, Abramović transforma ritualização, dor, silêncio, e limites físicos e mentais em modos poderosos para se construir significado em parceria com o seu público. A apresentação ‘The Artist is Present’ recebe especial atenção como motivação para se explorar o silêncio fora dos limites da interação verbal, ressaltando sua importância como um modo de comunicação.

**Palavras-chave:** *Performance* artística, Silêncio, Marina Abramović, Multimodalidade.

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## 1. Introduction

This monograph relates to art, multimodality and silence and once you know a little bit about myself you will understand my choice.

Having obtained an undergraduate degree in architecture and a post-degree in marketing, I have an eclectic professional background outside the academic context.

In 2018, I decided to quit my professional activities and take some time to reinvent myself. Following this path I started the Diploma Level Course in English (Curso de Especialização em Língua Inglesa) without knowing where it would take me. I just wanted to try something different and wished it to be related to the English language.

I am visual, I like fluid things and dynamic processes and it was a challenge for me to find the connection between my background and the course. This connection started to become clear when I came across concepts of multimodality. Bateman (2008, p.28) points out that “everything from book pages to films to **art installations to museums** to entire cities **may be included as multimodal texts** to be analyzed.”<sup>1</sup>

For me, multimodality helped me build a bridge between the content of the course and my background, as it opened the possibility to bring to my studies more visual and dynamic contents that I could explore and analyze.

Therefore, I decided to work with something related to art and I chose the work of Marina Abramović known as the grandmother of performance art, exploring how Abramović uses performance art to convey meaning and to generate social transformation.

While exploring Marina Abramović’s work, one specifically called my attention: the performance ‘The Artist is Present’. I related it to another concept discussed in the module Phonology and Spoken Discourse, which is part of the course syllabus: Silence. This performance was a new one that Abramović presented in the main retrospective of her work at the Museum of

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<sup>1</sup> Emphasis added.



Modern Art (MoMA) NY, in 2010. During the three-month performance she interacted individually and in silence with around 1,500 people.

Language studies tend to approach silence related to and as part of verbal interaction. The performance ‘The Artist is Present’ is an invitation to think and comprehend silence from a different perspective: as a powerful mode of interaction and meaning-making outside verbal communication boundaries.

Because Marina Abramović herself is her main resource to convey meaning in her performances, this monograph explores parts of her testimonies, interviews and lectures as a tool to help readers understand her work.

A common way of starting to write a monograph is by defining a question and the research methodology to be used. This was not the case of this paper. Both its question and research methodology became clear almost by the end of the writing process and this is why there is no section explicitly devoted to methodology.

Writing this paper was a dynamic and unfolded process, which started with the wish to study Abramović’s work and did not fit in any standard methodology system. It was organic and became an experience in itself. It is related to a hermeneutic phenomenological approach to human science research and writing, which Manen (2016) describes as a method that

does not offer a procedural system; rather, its method requires an ability to be reflective, insightful, sensitive to language, and constantly open to experience. (van MANEN, 2016 , p. xi)

Thus, the structure of this monograph explores the selected themes in different sections: an overview of Abramović’s performances (section 2), general concepts of multimodality and how they relate to Abramović’s work and ideas (section 3), and the performance ‘The Artist Is Present’ focusing on how Abramović uses silence as a mode of interaction and meaning-making with her audience (section 4). By way of conclusion, I present my personal testimony about the process of studying Abramović ‘s art.

## 2. The Art of Marina Abramović<sup>2</sup>

Marina Abramović is a Serbian artist born in 1946 and is internationally known as the grandmother of performance art.

Abramović started working with performance around 1970 when she made the shift in her career from two-dimension materials (mainly painting and photo) to art performances using time and her own body as medium to convey meaning.

Abramović grew up during the communist dictatorship in Yugoslavia, raised by a family strongly connected to the repressive regime. Going beyond emotional and physical limits in her performances seems to be a cathartic response to the pains, fears and suffering she went through during her youth.

‘Rhythm 10’ (1973) was Abramović’s first performance. The elements were the artist, 20 knives and a recorder. During the performance she stabbed herself between her fingers, using one knife per time and taking a different one every time she hurt herself. She recorded the first 30 minutes of the performance and started playing it again while repeating the same movements, cutting herself in the same way and pace. She reports:

It was the first time that I didn’t feel pain or any kind of discomfort. And doing it I understood that **in performance my body is object and subject** and that I can push the limits in front of the public as far as I can much more than if I would do it on private life.<sup>3</sup> (Museum of Modern Art, 2010)

In 1974, almost one year after her first performance, Abramović invited her audience to use 76 different objects for pleasure or pain (from a feather to a pistol with one bullet) to do whatever they wanted in her body. The performance was called ‘Rhythm’ and her instruction for the audience was: “I’m an object. You can use everything on the table on me. I’m taking all responsibility even killing me. And the time is six hours”. Almost 40 years later, she described her experience during this performing as follows:

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<sup>2</sup> Working on this section, I devoted some attention to a couple of materials – video files included – which in the end overlapped. That is why I opted for not making reference to them specifically, but they are behind what follows. The materials are the following: Abramović, 2014b; Abramović, 2015b; Cunningham, 2019; Morgan, 2018; Pomeranz Collection, date unknown; The Art Story, date unknown (see references).

<sup>3</sup> Emphasis added.

The beginning of this performance was easy. People would give me the glass of water to drink, they'd give me the rose. But after very soon there was a man who took the scissors and cut my clothes, and then they took the thorns of the rose and stuck them in my stomach. Somebody took the razor blade and cut my neck and drank the blood, and I still have the scar. The women would tell the men what to do, and the men didn't rape me because it was just a normal opening and it was all public, and they were with their wives. They carried me around and put me on the table and put the knife between my legs. And somebody took the pistol and put the bullet and put it against my temple. And another person took the pistol and started a fight. And after six hours, I started walking towards the public. I was a mess. I was half-naked, I was full of blood and tears were running down my face. And everybody escaped. They just ran away. They could not confront myself as a normal human being. And then, what happened was: I went to the hotel, it was 2:00 in the morning and, I looked myself in the mirror and I had a piece of gray hair. (ABRAMOVIĆ, 2015a)

In 1976, after moving to Amsterdam, Abramović met Ulay (Frank Uwe Laysiepen, an artist born in Germany in 1943). For twelve years they lived a love and art partnership. Together they created performances focused on male and female relationships, trust, body and mind limits as well as active and passive attitudes. The power, passion and pioneering in their partnership can be described through some of their performances together.

In 'Relation in Time' (1977), Abramović and Ulay appeared tied together by their hair facing away from one another, trying to maintain harmony between their minds and bodies. As other performances from the same series ('That Self'), it related to the interaction between male and female energies and what emerges from this energy interaction.

'Breathing in/Breathing out' (1977) related to duality and addressed the issue of working the self. Ulay and Abramović stayed for almost twenty minutes connected by their mouths sharing breathing without external access to oxygen, depending completely on each other to stay alive. After 20 minutes both felt apart, collapsing.

In 1980, they performed 'Rest Energy', a work about confidence and partnership. During the performance that lasted four minutes and ten seconds they challenged the limits between life and death. Facing each other, Ulay was holding an arrow on a tense bow close to and aiming at her heart. Microphones placed on their chests made it possible for the audience to hear their heartbeats getting faster in response to the growing danger they were facing. Abramović considers this the most difficult performance of her life.

The 'Great Wall Walk' (1988) marked Abramović's and Ulay's separation. Once again they were the object and subject of their performance. They walked for three months on the Great Wall of China (each one starting at one side of it) and then met in the middle to say goodbye. After this moment, they stayed the ten next years without speaking to each other. The original idea was to meet in the middle of the way to get married but during the years between the conception and the authorization from the Chinese government to perform it they ended their relationship.

Each of us walked two and half thousand kilometers to meet in the middle and depart from each other and continue working as single artists. It was very dramatic and a very painful ending. (ABRAMOVIĆ, 2010)

After her separation from Ulay, Abramović kept moving forward with her own performances, always testing the limits of her body and her mind aiming to relate to her audience in a meaningful way.

I'm interested in how far you can push the energy of the human body, how far you can go, and then see that, actually, our energy is almost limitless. It's not about the body, it's about the mind, which pushes you to the extremes that you never could imagine. (ABRAMOVIĆ, 2010)

In 'Cleaning the Mirror' (1995), five monitors play Abramović scrubbing a human skeleton. She brushed the skeleton parts with soap and water and each monitor showed a specific part of the skeleton. As she cleaned it she started to be covered with the skeleton dirt. This performance related to Tibet death rituals.

In 1996, Abramović in partnership with Jacob Samuel, produced 'Spirit Cooking', a cookbook of "aphrodisiac recipes" such as "13,000 grams of jealousy," and "mix fresh breast milk with fresh sperm milk." One year later, she created a multimedia installation of 'Spirit Cooking', which included violent recipe instructions painted with pig's blood on a white wall. Abramović also published a version with self-help instructions and transformed it into a performance dinner which she presents to friends, donors and collectors.

From a human skeleton in 'Cleaning the Mirror', Abramović scrubbed thousands of bloody cow bones in 'Balkan Baroque' (1997). In this performance, she referred to the ethnic cleansing during the 1990s and received

the Golden Lion award at the Venice Biennale. Here is what was underlying it all:

this was the time of the Balkan Wars and I wanted to create some very strong, charismatic images, something that could serve for any war any time, because the Balkan War now is finished but there's always some war, somewhere. So here I'm washing two and a half thousand dead, big, bloody cow bones. You can wash the blood, you never can wash shame of the wars. So I'm washing these six hours, six days and wars are coming of these bones... (ABRAMOVIĆ, 2015a)

In 2002, in 'The House with the Ocean View', Abramović explored the meaning of time living for 12 days in 3 different rooms on platforms open to the audience so they could observe her while she slept, washed, drank and urinated. Her idea was to cause the audience to lose track of time while observing her. She stayed silent during all the performance.

In 2010, Abramović showed a retrospective of her work at the MoMA NY. Other artists invited and coordinated by her revisited some of her performances while she performed a new and very special one named 'The Artist is Present'. The scenario was a wooden table with two chairs. During the three months of the exhibition, Abramović stayed there for six days a week for eight to ten hours, sitting on one chair almost without moving, interacting individually and in silence with the audience, each person taking turns to sit on the empty chair for as much time as they wanted. This performance impacted her in such a way that she decided to create the Marina Abramović's Method (explained in Section 4). For the purpose of this paper, special attention is given to the performance 'The Artist is Present' as it instigates the perception of silence as a powerful mode of communication.

### 3. Multimodality and art performance

My explanation of performance is very simple. **Performance is a mental and physical construction** that the performer makes **in a specific time, in a space in front of audience** and then energy dialog happens. **The audience and the performer make the piece together.**<sup>4</sup> (ABRAMOVIĆ, 2015a)

As stated in the Introduction, multimodality built the bridge between the content of the Especialização em Língua Inglesa course and my background, opening the possibility of bringing visual and dynamic contents to be explored and analyzed in my studies.

Developed in the early 2000s, the field of multimodality has its roots in Halliday's approach to language as a social semiotic system that investigates human choices for meaning-making in specific socio- cultural circumstances.

In the beginning, multimodality extended linguistic concepts related to spoken and written languages to other semiotic systems (modes) such as gestures and images. Later, it brought along other disciplines than Linguistics such as Art, History and Music in order to explore meaning-construction and how mode choices are connected to the social context in which they are used (JEWITT, 2013, p.5). The author goes on to add that

multimodality is built on a functional theory of meaning, an idea of **meaning as a social action realized through people's situated modal choices** and the **way they combine and organize these resources** into multimodal ensembles.<sup>5</sup>(JEWITT, 2013, p.13)

While researching for this paper, I realized that multimodal analysis became an important tool for performing arts studies.

Sindoni, Wildfeuer & O'Halloran (2016) relate to performing arts as multimodality and to Halliday's idea of meaning construction as an unfolding social practice and point out that

**Performances** and performing arts are described as **multimodal semiotic acts** that co-deploy a **range of semiotic resources** to produce and **construct meanings** across **different cultures and ages.**<sup>6</sup> (SINDONI, WILDFEUER & O'HALLORAN, 2016, p.326)

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<sup>4</sup> Emphasis added.

<sup>5</sup> Emphasis added.

<sup>6</sup> Emphasis added.

The article addresses the fact that social transformation in power relations among producers, performances and public plus technology and digital media have transformed the performing art scenario by building a closer and participative relation between artist and audience.

As Abramović (2015a) points out, “the audience and the performer make the piece together” and Sindoni, Wildfeuer & O’Halloran (2016, p. 331) call attention to the fact that “we still need to explore how viewing has come to be a major category in multimodal studies that responds to socio-semiotic considerations.”

In order to exemplify how multimodal approaches contribute to art performance studies, Sindoni, Wildfeuer & O’Halloran (2016) use two case studies and one of them is based on the work of Johnson (2015) entitled *Durational Performance: Endurance No 2 from 2015*, which shows direct connections with Abramović’s work.

As this paper does not aim to present a multimodal analysis of Abramović’s work, it is elucidative to include Sindoni, Wildfeuer & O’Halloran’s (2016) analysis of Johnson’s work (2015) by highlighting the parts that can be linked with Abramović’s art:

**Durational performances are forms of endurance art, involving hardship, such as pain, mental suffering, or loneliness experienced by artists in time...**

A recent example of this state of affairs in which **the paradoxical relationship between process and product surfaces** can be found in the **durational performance staged by Joy Johnson** over a period of two weeks in November 2015, in which **she carried out the task ...** that is bulling (i.e. polishing in order to see one’s reflection) a pair of black boots so as **to radically change her mental identity**, thus experiencing the soldiers’ ritualized regime to see how discipline turns them into war machines. **The act of polishing one’s own boots until they reflect the image of the soldier is a pretty powerful picture of performance seen as identity change...**

The objects and documents created by the durational performance artist are also part of the **semiotic space in which experience occurs**, and Joy Johnson will only carry out the routine **without external contacts, without sleeping, eating, or drinking but water for hydration purposes**, but, significantly, posting pictures on Instagram, thoughts on Twitter, Facebook, Tumblr, videos on YouTube, and messages with WhatsApp. The challenging questions raised by the durational performer are: **“Can the document be the performer?** Is Instant replacing the live, and if so, can the digital App become ‘my’ digital self? **Can the audience collaborate with me** as they tweet, click and whatsapp me?<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> Emphasis added.

(JOHNSON, 2015 *apud* SINDONI, WILDFEUER & O'HALLORAN, 2016, p.334)

In the same vein, Sindoni, Wildfeuer & O'Halloran (2016, p. 334) remark:

In this sense, a socio-semiotic and multimodal approach can help mapping, transcribing, and annotating the range of **different multimodal documents (including the performer's body)**, analyzing the ongoing process through a replicable model able to unpack the semiotic resources and texts produced and generated within the process. **Body-as performance is a living semiotic entity. It is both an intangible entity, and paradoxically living multimodal document**, a domain of enquiry, a developing theory and an unfolding method, at the same time. But **art can also be seen as representing social interactions, something** that the durational performance aims to document. ...

In each case, **multimodal social semiotic analysis leads to greater understanding of the meaning-making patterns involved in the various social activities which constitute "performance"** in the widest possible sense.<sup>8</sup>

A correlation between what Jewitt (2013) outlines as *six multimodality concepts* and the way Abramović conveys meaning through her work can also be elucidative for the purpose of this paper.

*Mode* is “the set of socially and culturally shaped resources for making meaning” (JEWITT, 2013, p.7). In Abramović's work, the main modes are time, her own body, her physical and mental limits as well as silence.

*Semiotic resource* relates to “actions, materials and artifacts we use for communicative purposes” (JEWITT, 2013, p.7). In 2015, at a TED conference, Abramović explained her resources to communicate with her audience:

all human beings are always afraid of very simple things. We are afraid of suffering, we are afraid of pain, we are afraid of mortality. So what I'm doing, I'm staging this kind of fears in front of the audience. I'm using your energy and with this energy I can go and push my body as far as I can. And then I liberate myself from these fears. And I'm your mirror if I can do this for myself you can do for you. (ABRAMOVIĆ, 2015a)

As for *materiality*, Jewitt (2013, p. 9) defines it as “how modes are taken to be the product of the work of social agents shaping material into cultural semiotic resources”. Abramović's performances generate transformation by helping her audience to be present and aware of themselves. Here is how Abramović refers to what she called her utopia:

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<sup>8</sup> Emphasis added.



I always think that the only way to change the world is to change consciousness and to change consciousness is on personal level and is so easy to criticize things how they are... but what we can do on personal level? ... to me is just a kind of possibility to use some tools I am offering that work for me and I hope can work in your own lives and that is what I want to really give to people. They can bring the tools, they can actually take them to get to a state of mind that can change themselves and also the world. (ABRAMOVIĆ, 2014a)

Regarding *modal affordance*, it is about “potentialities and constraints of different modes” (*ibid.*). Patricia Cohen (New York Times culture reporter) interviewing Abramović for Time Talks asked if during the interview they were doing art and Abramović’s reply was:

you know, we cannot do art here because this is Times Magazine and what we're doing here is conversation, and we have to always go back to reality. What is here, what we are doing now is a conversation of art not art ... context is everything ... people think that if you split in the street it is performance, it's not like that. Is the concept that really makes a change and the condition and the place where it is made, so tonight we are not making art. (ABRAMOVIĆ, 2014b)

Interviewed by Jared Leto, Marina also addressed another constraint and potential in art performance: “performance you can't really touch you can't hang on the wall like a painting but one thing you could do is to feel you have to experience you have to be there in time and space and to feel this will.” (ABRAMOVIĆ, unknown b)

*Multimodal ensemble* “representations or interactions that consist of more than one mode and meaning functions”. (JEWITT, 2013, p.11) Abramović’s performances challenge herself and her audience emotionally, intellectually and physically. She constantly pushes the audience to participate actively. She conveys meaning by receiving the energy from the audience, transforming it through herself and giving it back to them (ABRAMOVIĆ, 2015a). Here is what seems to be one of the main motivations behind her art: “My work is really to lift human spirits, that's all what I want to do.” (*ibid.*, date unknown b)

Regarding the concept of *meaning functions*, Jewitt (2013) explains that “multimodality is built on a functional theory of meaning, an idea of meaning as social action realized through people’s situated modal choices and the way they combine and organize these resources into multimodal

ensembles.” (JEWITT, 2013, P.13). Abramović’s functional approach – in Jewitt’s sense to meaning can be illustrated when she remarks<sup>9</sup>: “I only feel an interest for the art that can change society’s ideology [...]. The art that devotes itself<sup>10</sup> to esthetic values alone is incomplete.” (ABRAMOVIĆ, 2017b, p. 271)

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<sup>9</sup> What follows is my own version of a passage I read in Portuguese, which is: “Só sinto interesse pela arte que possa mudar a ideologia da sociedade [...]. A arte que só se dedica a valores estéticos é incompleta.”

<sup>10</sup> Or *is devoted*.

#### 4. Silence and the performance ‘The Artist is Present’ <sup>11</sup>

Anthropology, Psychology and Religion attribute more importance to the meaning of silence in human behavior and human communication than Linguistics, which often addresses silence within verbal communication boundaries.

Tannen & Saville-Troike (1985,) make a point on how linguistic studies simplify the power of silence in human communication:

Within linguistics, silence has traditionally been ignored except for its boundary-marking function, delimiting the beginning and ending of utterances. The tradition has been to define it negatively – as merely the absence of speech. (TANNEN & SAVILLE-TROIKE, 1985, p.xi)

Most of the existing research literature on silence is devoted to short silences (pauses) within discourses or at turn-taking boundaries in conversation, while only a marginal amount of data is available on **longer silences and their communicative significance**. <sup>12</sup> (TANNEN & SAVILLE-TROIKE, 1985, p.15)

As mentioned before, this paper aims to instigate readers to consider the power of silence itself (independent from speech) as a mode for meaning-making.

As speech, silence can also establish communication processes between message sender and receiver.

unlike speech which requires one's knowledge of a given language, **silence is a universal language** that could indeed express meanings intelligible to all humans irrespective of their linguistic background. (AL-JAHDHAMI, 2018, p.1471)<sup>13</sup>

Abramović's performance ‘The Artist is Present’ is an invitation to explore the power of silence as a mode for meaning-making:

In this work, Abramović renders the conventional totally unconventional. She stages an ordinary scenario, in which two people sit across from one another, but removes it from any we have known before: **silence becomes a new mode**

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<sup>11</sup> The very foundation for this section is to be found in *Museum of Modern Art*, 2010 (see references) .I have sought to lay out a summary of what is brought about by the text.

<sup>12</sup> Emphasis added.

<sup>13</sup> Emphasis added.

**of communication, a context for observation and, crucially, self-reflection.**<sup>14</sup>  
(MORGAN, 2018)

The year was 2010, the city New York, the place the Museum of Modern Art (MoMA) and the exhibition was the main retrospective of Marina Abramović's career.

One year before, curator Klaus Biesenbach suggested, as a basic idea for the retrospective, to have Abramović in some way present in each work. This suggestion related to the fact that he was always very attracted to exhibitions where the artist was present. He was more interested in meeting the artist than appreciating the artist's work. In the beginning, Marina resisted but finally trusted him and started to think about how to do it.

Those were difficult times for Marina, she was recently separated from her second husband, again after twelve years of intensive love; she was devastated and feeling lonely. Klaus Biesenbach was worried with her getting depressed and suggested her to assume she was alone and to fulfill her loneliness with her audience.

With all of this in mind, Abramović created the concept of the exhibition: in the upper part of the museum different artists representing some of her performances and in the atrium a new work in which she was going to be present by interacting individually and in silence with her audience during the three months of the exhibition. The name she chose was directly related to curator's first suggestion: 'The Artist is Present'.

This performance, when I say to the curator I will just sit in a chair and there will be an empty chair in front, and anybody from the public can come and sit as long as they want the curator said to me "this is ridiculous, you know, this is New York, this chair will be empty nobody has time to sit in front of you."  
(ABRAMOVIĆ, 2015a)

But something different and unexpected happened. Around one thousand and four hundred persons took part in the performance and some even more than once. People waited for hours in lines even sleeping overnight outside the museum to have a chance to interact with her. Abramović's impressions are revealing:

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<sup>14</sup> Emphasis added.

This performance, maybe 10 or 15 years ago, nothing would have happened. But the need of people to actually experience something different, the public was not anymore the group, relation was one-to-one. I was watching these people, they would come and sit in front of me, but they had to wait for hours and hours and hours to get to this position, and finally, they sit. And what happened? They are observed by the other people, they're photographed, they're filmed by the camera, they are observed by me, and they have nowhere to escape except in themselves. And that makes a difference. There was so much pain and loneliness, **there is so much incredible things when you look in somebody else eyes, because in the gaze with that total stranger that you never even say one word everything happened.**<sup>15</sup> (ABRAMOVIĆ, 2015a)

During the three months of the exhibition, Marina stayed eight to ten hours a day seated on a chair interacting individually with the audience, without pauses even for eating, drinking or going to the bathroom. The interactions were in complete silence, each individual could stay interacting with her as much as he/she wanted but only through eye contact; no physical contact was allowed. The scenario was very simple, it started with a wooden table and two chairs and later even the table was removed. The following is how Marina described it:

“you are sit in front of me  
 there is nothing happening  
 there is no plot  
 there is no story  
 there is no developing  
 there is no beginning / end.  
 there's nothing  
 I take everything away from you  
 it's just you and me  
 and it's about eyes and gaze  
 and this is true communication...  
**people can communicate much more through the eye gaze than any verbal conversation**  
 because if you're talking and I'm talking and you're thinking and I'm thinking there's so many interferences  
 it's like a curtain going between us  
 between this everything goes away  
 it is just you and me in gaze  
 it really moves you”<sup>16</sup> (ABRAMOVIĆ, date unknown b)

An Asiatic mother sat in front of Marina on the first day of the exhibition, holding her baby in her arms. Marina described her look as one so full of suffering and pain that she found it difficult to breathe in front of the

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<sup>15</sup> Emphasis added.

<sup>16</sup> Emphasis added,

woman. The baby's head was covered and once the mother took the cover off, Marina saw that the baby had a scar in the head. The woman kept making eye contact with Marina and she and the baby remained silent. One year later, the Asiatic woman recognized her picture in the book with photos taken by Marco Anelli during the performance and decided to tell both Marina and Marco her story. Her baby was born with cancer, went through a hard treatment and on that morning, before arriving at the MOMA, she had had an appointment with the doctor who told her there was no more hope. The woman described her double feelings: from one perspective, she was relieved that her baby would stop going through so much suffering but from another perspective she realized what it meant and then she went to the museum to interact in silence with Marina. For the Asiatic woman, that picture was the picture of this difficult moment that she had gone through. Later she kept in touch with Marina and told her she got pregnant again and now has a healthy child.

Paco Blancas, a New York-based make-up artist interacted with Marina in 'The Artist is Present' for more than fourteen times and was interviewed by the museum:

**M:** How many times have you sat with Marina so far?

**PB:** I think today was number 14.

**M:** When was the first one?

**PB:** The first one was March 11, two days after the opening.

**M:** Why do you keep coming back?

**PB:** I think Marina's piece has a very strong magnetism. It's hard to explain but it's almost like you feel this force, it draws you in, like a magnet. Sitting with her is a transforming experience—it's luminous, it's uplifting, it has many layers, but it always comes back to being present, breathing, maintaining eye contact. It's an amazing journey to be able to experience and participate in the piece. Also, I love meeting people in line. I've met a lot of people and have made a lot of new friends, many of them artists, but really all sorts of people. I keep in touch with them and we e-mail constantly to talk about our experiences. It's like a little community of people who come to participate in the piece.

**M:** I noticed in a number of the photographs recently published online that you're crying in many of them, and I saw you cried today. What about the experience elicits that emotion from you?

**PB:** She almost acts as a catalyst. She presses the button that makes you feel all these emotions and feelings. I think through the concentration and the focus, plus the energy of the audience, it creates this movement within you. It's very subtle the way it happens. Maybe it's just an image that pops while I'm connected with Marina. Let's say it's an image of someone I love deeply, and then this creates the emotion, the tears just come out. Most of the time it's tears of joy. You're just being and thinking about somebody or something that's important in your life. And then just acknowledging this person or situation and moving on into being present because yeah, the tears come, but I don't want to

cry for the entire sitting. I want to move on and continue to be with Marina, to be present.

**M:** You seem to have developed a very deep connection with her work. Can you talk a little about why?

**PB:** Something I was very interested in is that she said she's not interested in doing anything she's not afraid of. I find it fascinating that she has to do something that she's afraid of all the time, but she's done it over all these years, and she gets over the fear, she *goes* over the fear. I don't know how to explain, it's almost like she flies over the fear, the danger, the risk... and I love that. It's all about taking risks, and going beyond, and pushing the limits. I like these words that she said: "Who sets the limits?" I'm not saying it right, but it's a very profound phrase because we think we can only go so far, but she's teaching us that we can go beyond what we think we can do and I love that about her.

It's interesting how in a city like NYC where everyone's always rushing about, people will stop and wait and kind of be displaced in time in this piece. I think that's a really important aspect, now that you mention it. Because, yeah, we're always like, "I have to do this, I have to do that." But when I come here, I don't make any plans because I know I'm going to be here and I don't care what time it is. I just let go and forget about it. Sometimes we've been there for so many hours on line and you don't even notice it, it's like "Oh, how come it's so late?" You don't feel time anymore. Time stops, and there's just this energy. (KAGANSKIY, 2010)

Abramović (2015a) described the performance 'The Artist is Present' as the work that changed her life, the performance that went beyond the performance and became life. It, thus, reinforced the idea that it was crucial to share this experience as much as possible :

I understood when I stood up from that chair after three months I'm not the same anymore and I understood that **I have a very strong mission that I have to communicate this experience to everybody**<sup>17</sup> and this is how for me was born the idea to have institute of immaterial performing arts. (ABRAMOVIĆ, 2015a)

Inspired by this mission, Abramović decided to create an institute to promote immaterial art: the Marina Abramović Institute (MAI)

MAI is an organization that explores, supports, and presents performances and multidisciplinary practices, is dedicated to long durational works (time is a necessary dimension for the participants to experience art fully), creates public and participatory experiences and it is the home to The Abramović Method. (MAI, date unknown b)

Although the first idea was to have the institute operating in a building close to the Hudson River in NY, it operates in different countries at different

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<sup>17</sup> Emphasis added.

times through a continuous project which brings people together to experience being present: The Abramović Method.

Developed over decades of research on performance and immaterial art. Created by Marina Abramović, the Method is an exploration of being present in both time and space. It incorporates exercises that focus on breath, motion, stillness, and concentration. (MAI, date unknown a)

One of MAI's most popular workshops is called 'Cleaning the House'.

The workshop is realized during 5 days in different locations (always close to nature) with up to 14 participants. It started focusing on preparing artists for performances and now is open for anyone who wants to live a challenging experience for both body and mental limits.

During the workshop, participants will be asked to refrain from eating or speaking to bring body and mind to a quiet, calm state. Participants will be led through a series of long durational exercises to improve individual focus, stamina, and concentration. (MAI, date unknown a)

A complete internal reset, essential not only for performers, as they approach their work but also to other practitioners and professionals across all disciplines, improving focus, determination and the ability to generate new ideas. (MAI, date unknown a)

MAI, The Abramović Method and the workshop 'Cleaning the House' invite us to realize how silence, ritualization and practices to achieve physical and mental limits are powerful meaning-making modes.

Abramovic' always makes it clear that silence is a powerful mode of communication. The artist has a special relationship with silence in her life and work. As she said in an interview for HBO about her 70th anniversary (a silent birthday celebration at the Guggenheim Museum in New York): **“it's wonderful how you can communicate without talking.”**<sup>18</sup> (Abramović, 2017a).

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<sup>18</sup> Emphasis added.



## 5. Final considerations

Abramović continues to explore performance art by producing art in various places and galleries and teaching her principles through The Marina Abramović Institute. For the purpose of this monograph, I decided to explore her main performances up until and including ‘The Artist Is Present’ (2010), a significant performance in her career.

My choice to use so many quotations from Marina’s own statements was motivated by the fact that it is almost impossible to establish a limit between herself as a person and her art, so her quotations became critical for exploring and describing her work.

Through her art and her teaching, Abramović has been delivering a great opportunity for self-reflection and observation:

it is so easy to criticize the world as it is, ... we still have hunger in this planet with the wars we have the misery we have the poor and rich, as an artist if you just reflect the reality as it is nothing really change but **if you really can actually change consciousness on the individual level of human being then you can change the world.**<sup>19</sup> (ABRAMOVIĆ, date unknown b)

Before ‘The Artist is Present’, Abramović used to focus mainly on exploring her body and its limits as a mode of communication during performances.

Her experience while performing ‘The Artist is Present’ increased her interest in exploring the capacity of the mind when someone is in an immersion activity disconnected from the sense of time. She took silence as the main mode of communication. During 3 months she established nonverbal interaction with around one thousand and four hundred individuals. Removing everything from the interaction but the mutual gaze, Marina was capable of exchanging meaning with each participant and bringing hidden emotions to the surface.

The idea for this monograph started with concepts of multimodality and silence as a mode of communication. Exploring Abramović’s work was an

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<sup>19</sup> Emphasis added.

immersion and transformative process and opened to me a new understanding about art and its powerful role in society:

The function of the artist in a disturbed society is to give awareness of the universe, to ask the right questions, and to elevate the mind. (ABRAMOVIĆ, date unknown a).

As van Manen (2016) points out, in phenomenological human science, both literary sources and non-discursive artistic material are commonly used as source for analysis. In the authors' words,

Of course, each artistic medium (painting, sculpture, music, cinematography, etc.) has its own language of expression. Objects of art are visual, tactile, auditory, kinetic texts-texts consisting of not a verbal language but a language nevertheless, and a language with its own grammar. Because artists are involved in giving shape to their lived experience, the products of art are, in a sense, lived experiences transformed into transcended configurations. (van MANEN, 2016, p.74)

Writing this paper motivated me to value the transformational power to be found in the process of diving into ourselves:

the hardest thing to do is to do something that is close to nothing, because it is demanding all of you. (ABRAMOVIĆ, unknown d)

The conclusion of this monograph was written during July 2020, when the world needed to stop and to do physical isolation in order to content a virus (Coronavirus COVID -19), while a vaccine was still being developed. At a time when external interferences have been significantly decreased and everyone has been heavily demanded to do something that is close to nothing.

This is a time when the main ideas behind Abramović's performances became real and life has urged us to confront ourselves as well as to explore the transformational power of silence.

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