

RITUALS AND REPETITIONS: THE DISPLACEMENT OF CONTEXT IN
MARINA ABRAMOVIĆ'S *SEVEN EASY PIECES*

by

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B.F.A., York University, 2006

A THESIS SUBMITTED IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF
THE REQUIREMENTS FOR THE DEGREE OF

MASTER OF ARTS

in

THE FACULTY OF GRADUATE STUDIES

(Fine Arts – Art History)

THE UNIVERSITY OF BRITISH COLUMBIA

(Vancouver)

October 2008

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Abstract

This thesis considers *Seven Easy Pieces*, Marina Abramović's 2005 cycle of re-performances at the Guggenheim Museum, as part of a broader effort to recuperate the art of the 1960s and 1970s. In re-creating canonical pieces known to her solely through fragmentary documentation, Abramović helped to bring into focus how performances by Joseph Beuys, Bruce Nauman, Gina Pane, Vito Acconci, Valie Export, and herself were being re-coded by the mediating institutions. Stressing the production of difference, my analysis revolves around two of the pieces in detail. First, the Deleuzian insight that repetition produces difference sheds light on the artist's embellishment of her own *Lips of Thomas* (1975) with a series of Yugoslav partisan symbols. What follows is an examination of the enduring role of this iconography, exploring the 1970s Yugoslav context as well as the more recent phenomenon of "Balkan Art," an exhibition trend drawing upon orientalizing discourse. While the very presence of these works in Tito's Yugoslavia complicates the situation, I show how the transplanted vocabulary of body art may be read against the complex interweaving of official rhetoric and dissident activity. I focus on two distinct interpretations of Marxism: first, the official emphasis on discipline and the body as material producer, and second, the critique of the cult of personality as well as dissident notions about the role of *practice* in social transformation. It is in this sense that a distinctly spiritualist vocabulary also acquires a political dimension in drawing upon movements such as Fluxus and Neo-Dada, and underscoring the value of the immaterial and the non-productive. Finally, I explain how a reversal of Slavoj Žižek's tripartite structure of ideology can help to articulate how a repetition of Beuys's actions in this context actually displaces their cosmological aspect by virtue of the re-enactment setting alone.

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Acknowledgments

First and foremost, I would like to thank my supervisor, Dr. John O'Brian, whose great knowledge, patience, kindness, and intelligence have been invaluable to me during the course of my MA studies.

I would also like to express my deepest gratitude to my second reader, Dr. William Wood, who inspired me in selecting this topic and whose guidance and knowledge have always been illuminating and inspiring.

I owe special thanks to Dr. Serge Guilbaut, whose seminars were of great help in developing my ideas about art and social practice, as well as Dr. Carol Knicely and Dr. Katherine Hacker for their seminars on ritual and Orientalism, respectively. I am grateful to Dr. Bronwen Wilson, who has been immensely kind and helpful to me in support of my studies, and to whose advice and insights I am deeply indebted.

I would also like to thank my fellow students, whose passion and penchant for heated discussion have contributed to shaping this project from the very beginning. I also thank my family and friends for their continuing advice and support.

Finally, I recognize that the writing of this thesis would have been impossible without the University Graduate Fellowship and CGS funding from the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada.

Introduction

Reenactment in contemporary art can be divided into two main categories. Dealing with broader issues of historical returns, the first category includes reenactment *in performance*, such as Jeremy Deller's *Battle of Orgreave* (2004), a restaging of the violent 1984 conflict between police and striking miners in South Yorkshire. Marina Abramović's reinterpretation of Joseph Beuys' actions in *How to Explain Pictures to a Dead Hare* (1965) falls into the second subgenre, or the reenactment *of performance*. *Seven Easy Pieces*, her 2005 cycle of re-performances at the Guggenheim Museum in New York, is often cited as part of an ongoing effort to recuperate as well as reevaluate the art of the 1960s and 1970s. On the one hand, Abramović's emphasis on canonical pieces known to her solely through fragmentary documentation was a clear reference to the role of new media in ephemeral art; on the other, her intervention helped to bring into focus how performances by Beuys, Bruce Nauman, Gina Pane, Vito Acconci, and Valie Export were being re-coded by the mediating institutions.¹

Endowing the work with a strange uniformity, each performance was extended to seven hours from its original duration, with the whole cycle taking place over the course of seven days. Bruce Nauman's *Body Pressure* (1974) invited visitors to perform their own action against a constructed wall; Vito Acconci's *Seedbed* (1972) had him masturbating under a false gallery floor; in Valie Export's *Action*

Pants: Genital Panic (1969), the artist walked up and down a Munich cinema in crotch-less pants, holding a machine gun; Gina Pane's *The Conditioning* (1973) involved the artist lying on a metal bed over lit candles; Beuys covered his face with honey and gold leaf in *How to Explain Pictures to a Dead Hare*; and Abramović's own *Lips of Thomas* (1975) comprised of a series of ritualistic actions including eating, drinking, cutting, and self-flagellation. A special round platform was constructed for the cycle, and, on the last night, the artist premiered a new piece, entitled *Entering the Other Side*.

This last work incorporated the existing performance platform on which the artist was raised many feet in the air, wearing a striped dress of monumental proportions. "The artist is present, here and now," was all that was offered in the leaflet. After completing the six repetitions, each of them physically demanding, Abramović stood on the platform overlooking the performance space in a manner that some members of the audience described as benevolent. The title, *Entering the Other Side*, was a clear allusion to the combination of stasis, pain, and endurance that the artist has willingly imposed on herself over the course of her career. The precedent for the final piece was already set in *Nightsea Crossing* (1981-1987), a work in which Abramović and her partner Ulay sat motionless across from each other at a mahogany table for seven hours. This action was repeated in the courtyards of various museums over the course of 90 days. Referring to *Nightsea Crossing*, Abramović alludes to the difficulty of enacting a tableau vivant in the following terms: "as soon as you impose

a rule on yourself, such as not making any movement, you have to hold out. But when you're holding out you face terrible physical pain. After a while the pain ceases to exist."² With the termination of the pain comes a heightening of extrasensory perception; Abramović's self-imposed overcoming of boundaries is characterized as getting "through to the other side."³

One aspect of a process that hinges on the spectacle of overcoming pain is the mutual transformative potential of artist and audience. Paradoxically, even though every formal aspect of Abramović's re-performances had been rigidly predetermined—from the duration of each piece to the prescribed sequence of actions—the actual content seemed to have been left ambiguous, even empty. While it is precisely this tension between standardized, objective action and reciprocal, subjective transformation that marks the artist's broader project, something distinct was at work in the repeated pieces. In order for this distinction to be identified, however, it will be necessary to determine how the repetitions differed from the originals. In this regard, the overarching setting of the performance cycle immediately comes to mind: a round platform was built in the middle of the Guggenheim rotunda, reflecting the spiraling architecture, and enabling the audience to approach the artist without entering into her immediate space. Seven monitors were set up behind the platform, six of them initially blank. Each performance was documented from the same angle, lending the work a further uniformity. The motif of the number seven— seven monitors, seven performances, seven hours each—was an

allusion to the Book of Genesis, as well as a reference to the more arbitrary number of museum opening hours during the performances of *Nightsea Crossing*.

Significantly, the degree to which the existing pieces were altered is difficult to determine; this is mainly due to the inadequate documentation existing for many of the originals. For Nauman's *Body Pressure*, the directions have remained: a rectangular piece of glass was placed in the centre of the circular platform, so that the artist could enact the title gesture. "Press as much of the front surface of your body (palms in or out, left or right cheek) against the wall as possible," Nauman instructed in 1974, "Press very hard and concentrate. Form an image of yourself...on the opposite side of the wall pressing back against the wall very hard."⁴ In light of this description, the very structure of the piece would appear to change; originally intended to be enacted by the audience entering the Galerie Konrad Fischer in Düsseldorf, the re-enacted piece revolved around a virtual wall rather than an actual one.

First performed at the Sonnabend Gallery (and a subsequent re-enactment favourite), Acconci's *Seedbed* was less altered than the Nauman piece. Playing out as unambiguously as possible, the original work had the artist verbally interacting with viewers as they walked over the floor. In Abramović's version, however, it seemed uncertain that she was actually under the floor at all, in spite of the commentary emitting through the speakers. Well aware of the fact that she was not producing any seed, Abramović focused instead on the "moist and heat"⁵ being generated in the dark

enclosure of the circular platform. Visitors could climb onto this platform and listen to the artist's descriptions of her own actions. The shape of platform as well as that of the exhibition space complemented Abramović's spiritualist concerns. Claiming that "there are two kinds of spaces that produce energy: the spiral and the pyramid,"⁶ the artist utilized the museum space in an idiosyncratic way. It is in this sense that the Guggenheim emerged as the paradigmatic site for such an investigation.

Two of the re-performances required a physical transformation. In the guise of Valie Export, Abramović donned a militant-looking black leather jacket to go with her Kalashnikov, while, as Beuys, she transformed herself more dramatically, effacing her own features under a mask of gold and honey. Beuys's piece, *How to Explain Pictures to a Dead Hare*, came complete with a felt-insulated chair and an iron sole attached to the artist's right foot. Also significant is the fact that Abramović went through the process of securing official permission from the artists and their estates before restaging their pieces. The only one to decline her request was Chris Burden, whose 1974 piece, *Trans-Fixed*, had him famously nailed to the roof of a Volkswagen. And, while the repetition of *Trans-Fixed* was prohibited by Burden, the museum itself prohibited the recreation of Abramović's own *Rhythm 0* (1974) from the same year, deeming the inclusion of a loaded gun to be a security risk.⁷

Following *Body Pressure*, *Seedbed* and *Action Pants: Genital Panic*, Abramović restaged *The Conditioning*, the opening "action" of Gina Pane's *Self-Portraits* at the Galerie Stadler and a piece about which very little is known.

Although the original performance—in which the fireproof suit worn by Abramović was absent—lasted only thirty minutes, the new version incorporated a process of extracting the old candles under the metal bed and replacing them with new ones every 40 or 50 minutes. Abramović’s own piece of 1975, *Lips of Thomas*, was also extended from its original duration of two hours. Its tone was altered significantly by the inclusion of Balkan paraphernalia such as a traditional hat and boots. In 1975 Abramović ate honey and drank a glass of wine, crushing the glass in her right hand before whipping herself on the back and then lying down on the cross-shaped block of ice; in 2005 she donned a series of partisan symbols and played a recording of the Russian song *Slavic Souls*, weeping to it periodically. Whether or not *Slavic Souls* actually elicited an emotional reaction every time that it was played was unclear. This, of course, was all part of the ambiguity of a re-coding that was neither parody nor straightforward pastiche, and that relied on the artist’s presence in order to recreate something that was documented but lost.

A leading theorist of performance art, Peggy Phelan, alludes to the strategic difficulty of fixing the meaning of works that cite presence as a defining factor. “Performance’s only life is in the present,” Phelan writes in 1993. “[It] cannot be saved, recorded, documented, or otherwise participate in the circulation of representations *of* representations: once it does so, it becomes something other than performance.”⁸ While the piece can be performed again, this repetition will always signify something distinct.⁹ Phelan also claims that “to attempt to write about the

undocumentable event of performance is to invoke the rules of the written document and thereby alter the event itself.”¹⁰ The strength of performance art, in other words, lies in its very ability to foreground the problem of loss, memory, and the generation of meaning. Phelan’s privileging of presence can be understood in another sense too: the notion of a work of art that recreates mere form irrespective of the artist’s intentions is especially useful for pieces that foreground historicity and repetition as well as presence and transformation.

Such works are said to resist the process of commodification insofar as they foster an unpredictable, mutual experience, one which cannot be documented and sold. Just as importantly, they may also draw attention to, rather than deflect from, the institutionalizing processes at work in preserving the ephemeral. Vito Acconci was among the first to recognize the importance of documentation, admitting that performance “turned out to be after all only visual,” and that “the action might as well have been a picture.”¹¹ Since the time that this statement was made, the field of ephemeral art has expanded to include strategies from playing video in a continuous loop to simulate one’s presence in actual time to recruiting armies of nude women to perform in one’s place. *Seven Easy Pieces* appears to have been conceived in a different way: if the performer can enact a video loop by performing for seven backbreaking hours, Abramović seemed to be saying, she can also dispense with the ordering-about of other people’s bodies and perform the work herself. The notion of a performance as a piece to be “played” is one that necessarily challenges traditional

assumptions about mutual transformation. However, as recreated versions of paradigmatic body art, certain problematic elements remained intact.

As a point of departure, I will be framing my analysis in opposition to readings of performance art that privilege terms such as liminality, ritual, presence, and transformation, aligning key moments in the history of body art with analyses of how the re-performances function individually. While the reenactments in question are closer to reinterpretations, repetition will be defined in the Deleuzian sense, as difference outside of a concept or identity.¹² From this perspective, even *habitus* cannot produce true repetition: the action can either be perfected while the intention remains unchanged, or the intention itself may transform while the action remains consistent.¹³ “Repetition belongs to humour and irony,” Deleuze writes in 1969; “it is by nature transgression of exception, always revealing a singularity opposed to the particulars subsumed under laws, a universal opposed to the generalities which give rise to laws.”¹⁴

In turn, the Deleuzian understanding of repetition stems from the common ground between Kierkegaard and Nietzsche. Forgetting, it can be argued, is what enables us to think the new, if we follow Nietzsche; yet forgetting can also be a source of infinite comfort in the guise of an affectless repetition, an ecstatic emptying of content.¹⁵ Kierkegaard’s epistolary narrative about love and resignation is especially salient here: “Repetition’s love is in truth the only happy love,” he writes. “Like recollection’s love, it does not have the restlessness of hope, the uneasy

adventurousness of discovery, but neither does it have the sadness of recollection—it has the blissful security of the moment.”¹⁶ In order to begin thinking difference-in-itself, both Nietzsche and Kierkegaard oppose repetition to every form of generality and representation; both also align it with new conceptions of theatricality, memory and forgetting. Action, for Nietzsche, requires a willed forgetting; yet his notion of the eternal return also involves an obsessive repetition of the Same.¹⁷ In *Seven Easy Pieces*, Kierkegaard’s “blissful security of the moment” is paradoxically reconciled with Abramović’s predilection for danger and endurance.

My discussion will be focusing on two pieces in detail. First, the Deleuzian insight that repetition produces difference will be made more concrete through reference to the artist’s recreation of her own *Lips of Thomas* in relation to the Yugoslav context of her early work as well as the recent tropes of a specifically “Balkan Art.” In illuminating the insertion of a partisan iconography into this context, “Balkan Art” plays a distinct role. Here, I will be referring to the passage from the exhibitions of the 1990s, which were framed as being in dialogue with the Western canon and providing closure for post-Communist Europe, to a new exhibition trend that appropriated an orientalizing discourse and sought to mediate difference for Western audiences. This will also necessitate a brief look at the nostalgia for the East as it has shaped important currents in contemporary art; in this sense, the inscription of *Russia!* on the wall of the performance space may have given rise to a new and

productive set of associations, a deliberate blurring of references intended make the spectator face his or her own expectations regarding the piece.

In examining *Lips of Thomas* and the unrepeated *Rhythm 5* (1975), a different set of circumstances will come into play: the distinct vocabulary borrowed from Western body art and drawing upon Western feminism and commodity critique will be read against the official rhetoric shaping Yugoslav ideological formations as well as the rich vein of discourse provided by dissident texts. For example, Marshall Tito's own emphasis on ritual and the body as material producer will be juxtaposed with Milovan Djilas's critique of the cult of personality and the rise of a privileged "new class." Another critical point of reference will be the dissident Praxis Group, whose Marxist-Humanist notions of *practice* and *action* as key factors in the social transformation of human beings may help to shed light on a distinctly spiritualist vocabulary drawing upon Fluxus and Neo-Dada and stressing immateriality and the non-productive.

Second, a reversal of Slavoj Žižek's well-known tripartite structure of ideology will help to articulate how a repetition of Beuys's ritualistic actions fails to inculcate belief, displacing the cosmological cohesion of his project. The motif of *ideology* will be crucial insofar as it illuminates the logic of belief. As museum entertainment, the displacement of context involved in Abramović's version of *How to Explain Pictures to a Dead Hare* shifted the focus to the material and spatial conditions of the performance, making visible the ideological grid of the museum. In fact, it is precisely

here that the artist's fixation on emptiness will find itself imbued with new meaning: while the emptying out at work in the repetition may suggest Buddhist connotations, the art historical context will have to take precedence. It is only in this way that displacement can be shown to produce difference, instead of being a mechanical reiteration of the same.

Marina Positions: The History of Body Art and its Return

In *Body Art/Performing the Subject* (1998), Amelia Jones maps the history of the discourse of feminist body art as it moved from an “essentialist” feminism focusing on bodily substances and the ontology of presence in the 1960s and early 1970s to an “anti-essentialist” feminism repudiating the body as such in the late 1970s and early 1980s. Coupled with a penchant for making metaphysical pronouncements, the initial wave of body art was criticized for relying excessively on an anatomical basis for gender and ignoring the ideological forces at work on the desiring subject.¹⁸ Jones cites Mary Kelly’s critique of a spectatorial subject susceptible to being swayed by commodity culture as an example of a definitive turn away from the problematic of embodiment and toward a newfound investment in Marxist and Lacanian terminology: the living body as articulated through an intersubjective framework was displaced by a focus on the body as image; what Jones objects to in her analysis is precisely the body’s re-inscription into this purely visual register. Following in this vein, Jones’s more recent book, *Self/Image: Technology, Representation, and the Contemporary Subject* (2006) repeats the claim by focusing on how technologies of representation always aspire to, yet fall short of rendering the subject through visual means—far from being obsolete, the body always returns within the context of a problematic of embodiment that eludes neat resolution.¹⁹

Indeed, in a 1977 essay marking the proceedings of the “Art and Politics” conference in London, Mary Kelly makes every effort to efface the body in her

emphasis on the Lacanian phallus, which takes the form of a symbolic place holder masking a fundamental lack at the heart of the symbolic order.²⁰ In this view, the phallus is no longer understood as a plenitude—*castration* ceases to be the correct term here, as it invokes an old-fashioned psychoanalytic model. Instead, the phallus assumes a shifting place in a system of relations that are defined in a purely formal way. Kelly's conceptual approach does away with the body as it underscores the formal construction of gender relations. Consisting of a seemingly interminable series of "documents" collected over the course of five years, *Post-Partum Document* (1978) is indicative of an ascetic sensibility, strategically heralding a novel approach to the discourse of the mother-child relationship.

Jones's approach is similarly strategic in marking out a project that is ultimately recuperative: "Body art asks us to interrogate not only the politics of visibility," she writes, "but also...the inevitably eroticized exchange of interpretation."²¹ The contention here is that the initial wave of body art was actually in a privileged position to question the fundamental structures of political and aesthetic judgments—it is in this sense that a form of art once repudiated for being deceptively transparent now *returns* as an alternative to a discourse that re-enacts an exclusionary modernist impulse.²² However, despite an approach that is refreshed by phenomenological and feminist discourse, Jones retains one of the most problematic aspects of the history of performance. The affirmation that "the performed body/self [is] never completely legible or fixed in its effects"²³ might even rehearse the self-

definition of early performance. For Jones, danger lies in “[foreclosing]...the most dramatic and transformative potential of such engagement precisely by assuming that spectators will necessarily react or participate in a predictable way.”²⁴

Distinctions, of course, must be drawn. Of Abramović’s 2002 installation, *The House with the Ocean View*, Phelan has written that “great art accumulates relevance and meaning as it moves beyond the control of its creators.” Weak art, by contrast, “decides in advance what the piece is about.”²⁵ Certainly, this statement does not encapsulate the notion of emptiness as it is being used here, yet it is useful insofar as it suggests a broadening of the limits of the artist’s self-articulated project. Why re-perform? More specifically, what was at stake for the artist in returning to endurance-based body art, particularly in the context of the new museum setting and the self-imposed standardized duration? First, it was a question of boundaries and definitions. If theatre is traditionally understood as antithetical to performance art (insofar as it is equated by Samuel Taylor Coleridge with the “willful suspension of belief”²⁶), it was nevertheless a theatrical conquest of performance that ensured the continuation of its original project.

As many writers have noted, early performance borrowed from music, dance, literature and even theatre traditions; at the same time, theatre raided elements from the repertoire of performance art.²⁷ This reciprocity has become more apparent in recent decades, as video and new media have substituted devices such as looping for the simultaneous presence of artist and viewer. In a parallel gesture, Abramović

challenged video as an alternative to body art action by literally *performing the loop*, refusing to succumb to its facility. To standardize duration in a real time may signify, in one sense, a dramatic repudiation of new media: video returns as a kind of live spectacle, a reenactment of body art's greatest hits, and not even as an original gesture—the artist's decisive brush with reenactment came in the form of an encounter with *Marina Positions*, a 1997 performance by five artists in Amsterdam of *Art Must Be Beautiful*, *Artist Must Be Beautiful* (1975), a work in which Abramović “destroyed” her hair with a metal brush while chanting the repetitive mantra of the title.²⁸ Faced with an unsolicited and uncanny repetition, the artist was apparently forced to realize the absurdity of her possessive, “my-ego-my-art” attitude,²⁹ particularly in light of the democratizing pretensions of early performance. In attempting to deflate the myth of the gendered artist through the destructive reiteration of institutional demands, *Art Must Be Beautiful* would appear to furnish sufficient argument for its own appropriation.³⁰

Aware of the absurdity of her position yet anxious to protect her territory, the self-styled “grandmother of performance art” found herself in a curious double bind here: to sit and do nothing while her works were being recuperated would have been intolerable; yet to forbid their reenactment would have been inconsistent with their ethos. Since the artist's response to this bind was to concoct an equally absurd set of rules for reenactment, the next logical step was to enact those rules in the context of an original piece.³¹ Valie Export's 1969 *Action Pants: Genital Panic* may have been

originally preformed in a Munich art cinema as a way of jolting viewers with the sight of an actual female body, yet it returns here as an uncomfortable piece of nostalgia. Export's original gesture was a highly political one intended not only to "produce" but also to "represent action," emphasizing the moment in which it was made.³² In the absence of a replayable original, then, Abramović's reworking was a deliberate departure from a piece which had already anticipated becoming an irretrievable original. Where there is nothing left to perform, the artist seems to be saying, the only thing left to do is to reanimate the legend.

Another uncanny return from performance past was Vito Acconci's *Seedbed*, a reenactment institution in its own right. By replacing Acconci with a bevy of pornographic actors in a California mansion, Mike Kelley and Paul McCarthy were the first to postulate in *Dirty Acconci* "that the body-art of today performs the function of a specialized sub-cultural erotica for the art world despite its deconstructive pretensions."³³ In contrast, Abramović's recoding of Acconci cannot be reduced to Kelley and McCarthy's parodic register. But neither is it fair to imply that "sub-cultural erotica" is incapable of problematizing its own relation to presence. As soon as a performance begins to be thought of as a canonical script, it is no longer accurate to speak of originals and copies, of earnest performances and parodic inversions. Why, then, do the tenets of *sincerity* and *parody* remain obligatory categories for consideration? In one sense, to repeat means to overturn. One may be repeating as an act of subversion, a kind of highly charged position-taking meant to

evacuate the content and expose it as empty form. As a category, *pastiche* is more complicated than it may appear at first—its parodic value may be intentional or unintentional, as when a work of art “fails” to achieve its object.

In any case, the possibility of affect is not necessarily ruled out.³⁴ Pastiche or not, displacement is already performing the work of thinking the new. For Pierre Bourdieu, for example, the effect of repeating a work from the past “in a radically transformed field of compossibles” is equivalent to the *automatic* production of parody, regardless of whether it is intentional or not: an actor might signal ironic distance from a text in the theatre, for example, or the same text might be performed for an audience located on the opposite end of the cultural field.³⁵ In the specific case of *Seven Easy Pieces*, Bourdieu’s mapping of the rupture with tradition may be useful insofar as it associates repetition with the production of incongruity: “The newcomers get beyond the dominant mode of thought and expression not by explicitly denouncing it,” Bourdieu writes in *The Field of Cultural Production*, “but by repeating and reproducing it in a sociologically non-congruent context, which has the effect of rendering it incongruous or even absurd,” merely by revealing convention.³⁶ Central to Bourdieu’s model of circulation and exchange is the notion of *belief*: The act of reproducing something *to the letter* and thus rendering it empty is associated with a “heretical break” in his thought. In this context, parody and pastiche emerge as the instruments of choice for “ex-believers”; heresy takes on a performative form. One instance where this model would not be out of place is the new version of *How*

to *Explain Pictures to a Dead Hare*, which, as I will later show, effects the displacement of Beuys's spiritualist agenda into a different framework.

Another way to read the complicated temporal exchange at work in *Seven Easy Pieces* would be through what Hal Foster has called the staging of non-synchronous and incongruent forms.³⁷ In *Return of the Real*, Foster develops the Freudian notion of *Nachträglichkeit* to account for the repetitions of key strategies of the avant-garde by successive generations of the neo- and post-avant-gardes and their reciprocal re-framing.³⁸ In *Design and Crime*, this model is modified to accommodate the multiplicity of today's practices. When Abramović re-performs Export's 1969 *Action Pants: Genital Panic*, what she is re-enacting is not the performance itself (which she has never seen) but the widely disseminated poster. Here the artist is activating Foster's category of the incongruent by "folding medium onto medium"—in other words, by recreating a performance based on a promotional still—and "space onto space"³⁹—by translating the original cinema context into the new museum context. In a similar sense, Abramović's *Seven Easy Pieces* is a work that activates the non-synchronous by folding time onto time.

Action and Gesture; Belief and Ideology

Understood in the loosest possible way, Abramović's work can be thought of in terms of a passage from an implicit form of institutional critique in many works of the 1970s—in spite of their spiritualist elements—to an increased focus on spirituality and a move away from critique in some works of the 1990s. It is to the complicated early works that I now wish to turn. There is, for example, another way to read the spiritualist basis of the early performances by linking them to contemporaneous discussions of ideology: the transformation of materiality by human work can be turned towards the immaterial by harnessing activity for non-productive ends. Certainly, this type of intervention is not explicitly oriented towards the political; yet the context in which these early works were created may have made them implicitly political—even dissident—if examined from a certain point of view.

In speaking of more recent works, then, must the artist's apparent disinterest in politics and investment in purely aesthetic problems be framed as a deliberate choice? Or is there a moment when the apparent focus on spiritualism underscores different concerns and possible interpretations, particularly when the "meaning" of the piece may appear to be unresolved? Significantly, Abramović's investigations sometimes hint at an absence of resolution. Just as the repetition in *Art must be Beautiful* resisted a mechanical repetition of the model, so the obsessive cleaning of cow bones in *Balkan Baroque* (1998) enabled the production of difference. The second piece can be summed up as a successful purifying process. *Balkan Baroque* in particular is

suggestive of a failed catharsis, a deadlock of mourning. As the bones amass in ever greater piles, Abramović, dressed as a washerwoman, falls into increasing despair before a task that can never be completed.⁴⁰ Yet the same activity is invested with a very different set of meanings in *Cleaning the Mirror I* (1995).⁴¹ The difference between the two pieces is neatly encapsulated in the title of the latter, which refers to a Zen Buddhist metaphor for taking away one's fear of dying by emptying the mind.⁴² While the repetition in *Balkan Baroque* seems to be addressing the impossibility of resolution, utilizing "deliberately sentimental" Hungarian music, the repetition in *Cleaning the Mirror I* hints at a type of resolution achieved only through emptiness.

A video such as *Art must be Beautiful, Artist must be Beautiful* (Copenhagen, 1975), however, calls up yet another set of associations. Although the artist's frenzied brushing of her hair can be aligned with mortification through pain and endurance, the repetitive sequence of actions draws upon the vocabulary of classic feminist gestures. Whereas the artist's articulated project involves an emptying-out of the mind similar to that in Zen Buddhism, such a piece can easily be read as a charged critique conflating feminine rituals with institutional injunctions.⁴³

In this sense, for example, Abramović's aggressive repetition may be seen as a counterpoint to Mierle Laderman Ukeles's emphasis on housework as "a literal art of work existing in real time."⁴⁴ Predicated on a materialist view of performance as an embodiment of real social practices, Ukeles's insistence on shaking hands with sanitation workers after performing their tasks turned the repetition of a basic gesture

into a chain reaction meant to strengthen a human support structure.⁴⁵ In a similar way, Abramović's frenzied brushing transformed a feminine ritual into a critique of both the conventional art object and the anxieties of the performer inhabiting the place of this very object. Ostensibly, *Art must be Beautiful* concerns the freeing of the body from the restrictions imposed upon it by Western culture as well as the inhibiting fear of physical pain and death.⁴⁶ Yet it can also be read in another way. Describing the impact of *Touch Sanitation* (1978-80), Robert C. Morgan writes that Ukeles's series of actions recognized the basic social practices that supported various institutions and nourished the notion of culture. "In the course of redefining her own domestic role," he writes, "[Ukeles] caught the meaning of art as action, art as gesture, art as circumstance within an appointed system or any designated structure."⁴⁷

As I will later show, Abramović's approach to action is not completely unrelated to Ukeles's reference to both existing and potential support structures. Even more pertinent to such notions of labour and display is the somewhat anomalous *Role Exchange* (1975), which construes identity as a type of performance. Signaling what is arguably the most radical destabilizing of boundaries between public and private in Abramović's career, *Role Exchange* involved the artist spending four hours in place of an Amsterdam "red-light" local, who was asked to replace her at her own opening at de Appel Gallery and perform the usual duties entailed by such an event. In an overtly explicit way, such a work recalls Bourdieu's description of the shifting of

value within the cultural field. Nonetheless, it is not the only work to do so; a comparable awareness of art action as a gesture that constructs the museum as a social space can be found in Abramović and Ulay's *Imponderabilia* (Amsterdam, 1977): "naked we stand opposite each other in the museum entrance," the instructions read, so that "the public entering the museum has to turn sideways to move through the limited space between us."⁴⁸

Abramović's interest in the exhibition space is often reduced to a reversal of Carol Duncan's account of the invention of the temples to aesthetics: in other words, her installations and performances are described as a reinvestment of the secular with elements of the sacred.⁴⁹ Works such as *Imponderabilia*, however, address this space from a different angle, recasting the terms of museum going as an aesthetic ritual. Another clue that the greater project may betray an internal incoherence is the artist's ambiguous connection to the feminist project. At the heart of the jarring incongruence of Abramović's *Export* are two very different attitudes towards the feminism. *Role Exchange* notwithstanding, Abramović has made it abundantly clear that she has never considered herself a feminist: "I didn't know what feminism was until I was 30 years old," she claims in an interview. "I came from Yugoslavia where women are very strong. My mother was a [Martial] in the Army. She was Director of the Museum of Art and Revolution. All her friends were in high positions with the Ministry of Culture. Women were totally equal in Yugoslavian society after the revolution."⁵⁰

Beyond shedding light on the obvious advantages of being well-connected, this passage points to a self-conscious fashioning of the artist's personal mythology: where Beuys relied on shamanistic allusions to the integrity of such uncomplicated materials as soil, fat, honey, and felt, Abramović continues to draw on a mythological repertoire that includes an embalmed patriarch for a grandfather and war heroes for parents. Clearly, personal history was used here for dramatic effect. Yet the question remains: was the discourse of feminism, which was an integral part of the canonical body art repertoire, really so foreign? Since Yugoslav ideology did a great deal to promote equality of the genders, feminist critiques of gender relations were not as widespread in this context. However, the region in question was still predominantly patriarchal under a tenuous socialist regime. To quote a Croatian source, "the elimination of a superficial stereotype in employment must be one of the main goals of a modern, progressive and socialist politics."⁵¹ The indispensable presence of women in the "battle" of socialist revolution was rationally connected to economic and social benefits of having women in the workforce. Yet it is also widely considered that gender identity politics developed without much success in most parts of East Central Europe,⁵² and that feminist discourse was especially "susceptible to phallogocentric recuperation."⁵³

Naturally, feminist concerns were not unknown: the works of Sanja Iveković, for example, can easily be framed as a foil for the metaphysically charged performances of Abramović. From this perspective, a work such as *Tragedija Jedne*

Venere (The Tragedy of a Venus) of 1976 fits neatly into a genealogy of feminist performance precisely because of its use of dis-identification as a way of documenting life's stages.⁵⁴ The now-platitude that gender identity is unstable and partly predetermined by a web of power relations is readily encapsulated in a piece utilizing a story book structure to combine photographs of the artist with various stills of Marilyn Monroe on the opposite page. In *Double Life: Documents for Autobiography 1959-1975*, Iveković juxtaposes images gleaned from both public and private realms in order to devise a narrative about an imaginary double life: images of shampoo and stocking advertisements are synchronized with private photographs of the artist at various stages in her life.

This kind of comparison between Iveković and Abramović, I suggest, is not an entirely fair one. Obviously, we are obliged to be skeptical when told that Abramović, in contrast with Western peers such as Adrian Piper and Carolee Schneemann, came of age in a place where performance was not defined in opposition to a commodity based art market.⁵⁵ While this is technically true, we must also consider such factors as the persistence of bourgeois nationalism in the collective Yugoslav imagination, and the influence of Fluxus and Neo-Dada in a somewhat marginal milieu that was nevertheless being shaped from the outside. And, just as the absence of an art market is sometimes mythologized, so the dissident status of such practices is often glorified without being properly interrogated. Recent efforts to shed light on parallel histories of regional conceptual and performance art in an expanded

context take their cue from Slovenian curator Zdenka Badinovac's directional exhibition, *Body and the East* (1998).⁵⁶ "In these places public actions, particularly on the street, were often banned—and artists arrested—by the police," Badinovac writes in the catalogue: "Therefore many of the actions documented here took place in private apartments, with the artists performing at great personal risk." It is emphasized that the art survived not "only despite the absence of any art market," but also in the face of political marginalization.⁵⁷

Furthermore, the fact that Yugoslav artists were uncommonly adept at such interventions goes a considerable way towards romanticizing the era in Western eyes. One work that is frequently trotted out—and bears a resemblance to *Seedbed*—is Iveković's 1979 *Triangle*. This piece is tidily emblematic of Badinovac's overarching project. Staging an action during Tito's visit to Zagreb and subsequent parade through the streets, Iveković conceived of her performance as a way to bait a spying neighbour into "reporting" her unpartisan display of public masturbation. The denouement of the work involved the interference of the police; Iveković predicted that an officer would be arriving to start "[ringing] her doorbell and [ordering] the persons and objects ... to be removed from the balcony."⁵⁸

Abramović's own involvement with a similar problematic is evident in *Art Must Be Beautiful* (1975), *Rhythm 5* (1974), and Amsterdam's *Role Exchange* (1975). Documented as a series of photographs and videos (carefully considered in light of their eventual status as the sole visual evidence), these performances engaged not

only the divide between art and everyday life but also the specifically Yugoslav ideology operating within the cultural sphere in which such works were produced. In interviews, Abramović has alluded to the lack of support for artists' activities in Yugoslavia, and their experience of isolation in the context of a wider scene.⁵⁹ Certainly, it seems clear that their activities were symbolically defined in the most tenuous of ways; yet they did occupy a definable position within the cultural framework, and can be said to have constituted a legitimate scene.

How useful are the insights of Pierre Bourdieu in this context? In *Field of Cultural Production*, Bourdieu argues that “agents occupying the diverse available positions [in any given field]...engage in competition for control of the interests or resources which are specific to the field in question.”⁶⁰ Just as, in the economic field, these agents compete for capital by deploying a number of different investment strategies, so cultural agents compete for cultural capital. Conceiving of the notion of *habitus* as an answer to subjectivism (as well as to the apparent evacuation of the role of the agent in structuralism and much intertextual analysis), Bourdieu expanded the sphere of artistic activity to encompass the set of specific social relations.⁶¹ Bourdieu's analysis is systematic without being totalizing. Capital is subdivided into *symbolic*, consisting of the degree of inherited prestige, and *cultural*, understood as an internalized code and a form of knowledge acquisition.⁶² Dominated without being directly determined by the wider field of power, cultural production can be further divided into the subfields of large-scale and restricted production, with the

competitive stakes of the latter largely revolving around the tenets of disinterestedness, consecration, and prestige.

The centrality of the notion of belief, inextricable from the disavowal of profit, is crucial here. What makes the positioning of Abramović (as well as Neša Paripović, Zoran Popović, Era Milivojević, and others) in 1970s Belgrade more interesting is the specific role of symbolic and cultural capital in a sphere where belief in a more general sense functioned in ideologically specific ways, and where questions of ideology were being disputed on a regular basis. The sphere of art practice was not subject to the same restrictions as in the Soviet Union, and it was tied to a series of selective art academies which determined that the artists had a legitimate vocation; artists could reasonably expect to live comfortably in the absence of an art market and in a milieu in which economic capital played a negligible role.

Needless to say, the seemingly outdated concept of ideology becomes as critical as that of belief. While the more familiar critiques of ideology tend to hinge on the problematic of representation and resulting dependence on the absolute division between truth and falsehood, it is precisely the notion of ideology that becomes nuanced here. It may even be suggested that the Yugoslav turn towards body art was, in part, a response to the Titoist emphasis on the disciplined body as a material producer—an ideological reality that logically re-configures a piece such as *Art Must Be Beautiful* into a parody of art as a disciplinary practice.

Art Must Be Beautiful is often explained in conjunction with other early performances such as *Freeing the Body*, *Freeing the Memory* and *Freeing the Voice* (1975). In the first, Abramović exhausted herself by moving until she crumpled to the ground in an abject mess. *Freeing the Memory*⁶³ found her enunciating all remembered words by free association, shrugging off what has been culturally encoded. Presumably, *Freeing the Voice* concluded the set by completing the metaphorical emptying-out of the mind: Abramović screamed until she lost her voice, moving ever closer to a pre-linguistic state of pure presence. As is already clear, these pieces are traditionally discussed with reference to Eastern philosophies and ritual theories, both of which have preoccupied the artist since 1975. Abramović's ideal of an Eastern community that achieves a more permanent state of non-suffering through the emptying-out of the mind is reflected in her discussion of her influences: admiring "a sixty-year-old Tibetan woman who prayed by prostrating herself, repeating this moment over and over through the day," the artist recognized this activity as "ten or fifteen hours of work."⁶⁴ What followed was an attempt to enable the "Western body" to have a similar kind of experience with work that was fundamentally unproductive.

Abramović has expressed an interest in such highly charged objects as the Mecca stone, claiming that the stone is "bonded with a transmission of energy" of a kind "assigned to faith."⁶⁵ The ideal of pure energy is carried through in the well-known crossing of the Great Wall of China, which was built "in accordance with the

planet's line of energy.”⁶⁶ Abramović differentiates between objects that are “for human [or public] use” and those that are “for spirit use.” A third category consists of “power objects, which contain a certain energy.”⁶⁷ Such objects can be natural or manmade. Describing an artifact at the Louvre that filled her with “an enormous sexual desire,” Abramović reveals that the object was actually a monolithic piece of basalt engraved with a scorpion and used in Babylonian fertility rituals.⁶⁸ In interviews, she has claimed that “transformation only matters if you really go through something yourself.”⁶⁹ Her efforts to unravel the construct of the subject can be said to occupy Margaret Morse's first plane of language, or “the *here* and *now* in which we can speak and be present to one another.”⁷⁰ Yet the artist's investigation of this plane also aims to transcend language through a focus on mortification of the nude body. Significantly, this mortification—now understood as a producer in the vein of Titoist ideology—takes on new connotations in the context of the 1970s, making it difficult to read certain early performances through their underlying spiritualist and aesthetic concerns.

One image in particular bears further scrutiny. Read as a Yugoslav communist emblem, this star appears most notoriously in *Rhythm 5*, a Belgrade performance that can be framed as response to the repressive policies of Tito's regime. Lying down in the center of a burning, five-pointed star, Abramović literally set fire to Tito's Yugoslavia. The outcome of the performance was not planned; shortly after stepping into the star, which was made of wood soaked in petrol and fed

with clumps of her own hair and toe nail clippings, Abramović became unconscious from the lack of oxygen. She was rescued only when it became apparent that she was not reacting to the approaching flames. Unplanned, this last event elicited a reflection on the subject of the body's limitations and how they might be incorporated into new performances.

Yugoslav Context

What might such a piece have meant in the context in which it was originally performed? This question becomes a crucial one, given the reappearance of a highly specific visual vocabulary in the repetition of *Lips of Thomas*. An analysis of this context will not yield a new and self-sufficient way of reading the work. Rather, it will provide another dimension for situating the responses that such a re-performance might have provoked in the public. This analysis will also be critical for taking stock of the recuperation of practices that were marginalized and often suppressed in their proper place and time. Not only must the resurgence of interest in these practices be questioned, but Western expectations must also be taken into account. What follows, therefore, is brief overview of how the Yugoslav system functioned in a broader sense as well as how it treated its artists.

To begin with, Yugoslav artists of the 1960s and 1970s were forced to adapt to a variety of contradictions long after the Socialist Party came to power the mid-1940s and the Federal People's Republic of Yugoslavia was created.⁷¹ The situation was complicated. Although Tito attempted to end Yugoslav antagonism with the USSR in 1956, ideological tensions remained—Tito's multinational republic became a paradigm of non-alignment, poised precariously between the East and the West. During this period, Yugoslavia's "third way" socialism was partially responsible for both its openness to foreign influences and the diversity of its avant-gardes.

Nonetheless, the position of the progressive Yugoslav artist was one of simultaneous inclusion and exclusion: many forms of avant-garde art were funded by the state and artists were often subsidized; yet, due to a lack of interest, the support system was a weak one, and the artists often isolated. In part, the difficulty of determining the actual role of such practices may concern their recent recuperation in the West: the problem refers to the arguably restrictive separation of socialist and post-socialist art into categories that all involve some form of return: in order to be currently visible in a broader context, historical Yugoslav works had to either directly reflect socialist ideological phenomena, or be critical of them in ways that were dictated in some measure by the demands of Western trends.

According to some of the region's art historians, Eastern European conceptual art was already politicized by virtue of "its critical and decentralized positioning in the political landscape that was controlled by the bureaucratic structure of single-party political systems."⁷² While it is precisely this ambiguous positioning that makes Abramović's gestures interesting in their original context, it is necessary to examine what such statements actually mean. In what way were the activities of the artists decentralizing? Is it accurate to speak of an uncomplicated bureaucratic structure? What did it mean to be a dissident? To unravel this further, we must take a detour through Titoist rhetoric and ideology.

For the most part, the relevant sources will be of the official variety, including the speech excerpts in *Tito on Non-Alignment* (1976) and the lexicon, *A Handbook of*

Yugoslav Socialist Self-Management (1980). However, the presence of the Marxist-Humanist Praxis Group⁷³ in this intellectual milieu will not be discounted, even if this discourse was never referenced directly. The group of Croatian and Serbian intellectuals that formed around the journal *Praxis* provided a crucial philosophical reference for those who were critical of the regime and its “dissident” brand of Marxism-Leninism. Calling for a return to early Marx, *Praxis* emphasized the dynamic aspect of human creativity; going against the materialist vein of Titoist ideology, man’s essentially “spiritual” role was to be an architect of his own transformation through the shaping of both natural and social reality.⁷⁴

Critical to the leader’s projected image and personal mythology was his simultaneous status as a “revolutionary fighter” and “visionary statesman.” Eschewing participation in a cold war that depleted populations both “materially and psychologically,” Tito’s politics were predicated on a particular brand of nonalignment. The realization of this goal would have made it possible for the state to extend “material and technical assistance” to countries poorer than itself,⁷⁵ which would, in turn, establish a “sound material base for peace.”⁷⁶ Unsurprisingly, Titoist rhetoric was peppered with allusions to materiality. In the face of anxieties about being overlooked or perceived as third-rate, emphasis was placed on Yugoslavia having earned its place among other enlightened nations through its loyalty to the allied cause and role in the liberations of its own peoples. Naturally, the accrued losses were measured out in material terms.

In Stalinist propaganda, the picture was very different. The Yugoslav communists, who had failed to organize themselves according to the principles of centralism, were perceived as failing to attain the status of a party that could guide the working class.⁷⁷ Early on, Yugoslavia was seen as turning away from the Marxist-Leninist model supplied by the USSR and following the example of the populist Kulaks.⁷⁸ To affirm the peasantry as the “most stable foundation of the Yugoslav state” was seen as part and parcel of the occlusion of growing capitalist elements. What the critics were primarily condemning was the rejection of the only class under whose leadership the transition to socialism could actually occur; the Titoists were also accused of denying the growth of capitalist elements within the country, thereby signaling a return to bourgeois nationalism.

Clearly, the environment in which the artists were working was a volatile and fragmented one. Yet this field of conflicting forces has also been interpreted vis-à-vis the functioning of a dialectic process, one hinging on the counterbalance between decentralizing/liberalizing movement on the one hand and a growing concern for social control on the other.⁷⁹ Traditionally, commentators on ideology and its shaping of Yugoslav history have pointed to a dialectical opposition of democratic and bureaucratic forces at work.⁸⁰ In *Yugoslavia: The Non-Leninist Succession*, Ross Johnson attempts to correct certain Western misconceptions by outlining Tito’s post-1960 restructuring of the political system and movement towards the decentralization of power and collective leadership. Just as the construction of less personalized

mechanisms including the rotation of cadres was emphasized in the 1960s, the early 1970s marked the creation of a new governing body composed of representatives from the different republics and provinces.⁸¹ The process of de-centralization was temporarily derailed by the Croatian nationalist uprisings of 1971, prompted by perceptions of a Serbian hegemony within the larger power structure. For Johnson, however, the re-Leninization of Tito's Yugoslavia has been greatly exaggerated—while still quasi-Leninist, political power in Yugoslavia transformed from a centralized party apparatus in Belgrade into a series of sub-organizations.⁸²

Thus, it is accurate to speak of a contradiction at the heart of Titoist doctrine and praxis: the two irreconcilable sides consist of what has been called “a quasi-military organization demanding uniformity of opinion and democratic centralism,”⁸³ and a more liberal type of organization accommodating a range of dissenting opinions. The 1980 “handbook” of Titoist terminology attempts to account for this problem by citing various limiting factors that all guaranteed a certain degree of alienation. These include a still developing capacity for production, the existence of regional disparities as well as that of a free market structure,⁸⁴ and the influence of an outside market on the Yugoslav economy.⁸⁵ On the other end of the spectrum, dissident writer Milovan Djilas was an outspoken critic of bureaucratic procedures. “If the objective laws of socialism were free to act after socialist forces in the economy had prevailed over capitalism; if these laws were not hobbled by bureaucratic chains...if a socialist democracy were to come into being...then the

social process itself, society itself... could replace such a management, could cast up to the surface new, young forces ready for new relationships, new conditions.”⁸⁶ For Djilas, Stalin’s system concealed the workings of a state capitalism in which social relations inhibited the development of production forces, and unprofitable enterprises were left intact.

In fact, when seeking to understand the intellectual culture in which the artists were working, it is impossible to omit the influence of dissident writers such as Djilas. An early critic of Tito’s cult of personality, Djilas lost his status as partisan and key ideologue in the mid-1950s, remaining imprisoned until 1966. “As if the sluices had opened, all my suppressed, critical ideas began to gush forth unbridled, aimed, of course, at the Soviet system,” he writes, “...For there can be no question that Yugoslav and Soviet realities were essentially alike, if not identical.”⁸⁷

In order to better understand the nature of Socialist humanism as described by *Praxis*, it is useful to contextualize the project of humanism as it was being rethought in the 1960s and 1970s. Like Djilas, the Praxist Group critiqued Tito’s cult of personality and stressed humanist intelligence as an antidote to the “spiritual emptiness”⁸⁸ inherent in non-socialist regimes. This vein of Marxism-Humanism emphasized the primacy of understanding the problem of alienation, relying on Marx’s reading of Hegel and Feuerbach in the *Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts of 1844*. In appropriating Feuerbach’s critique of religion as the alienated product of human labour, Marx was able to formulate a similar

understanding of commodity fetishism. Nonetheless, their methodology was not limited to the thought of young Marx. Individuals such as Mihailo Marković and Predrag Vranicki underplayed the materialist angle in favour of a Marx for whom man was a “being of practice” in a world in which “free, conscious activity is the species character of human beings.” In this discourse, man was defined by his ability to “freely and consciously [transform] his own life.”⁸⁹ The Praxists achieved dissident status; accused by the central committee of having a “destructive” effect on the very task of social critique,⁹⁰ the 1960s activities of the group were greatly restricted before being completely prohibited in 1975. Eight philosophers lost their academic positions in the process.

The question of what true Marxism was continued to haunt ideological discourse and intellectual discussion into the late 1970s. Even for those who were not explicitly critiquing “real existing” socialism, these tensions would have been a vital part of public discussion. Returning to the thematic of the disciplined body, it may be useful to ask if the metaphor of self-management can be extended; in this way, what applies to the collective body may be revealed to also apply to the individual one. Just as, according to the *Handbook*, “the entire social structure in the Yugoslav system of self-management was founded upon self-management in the commune which was paralleled by self-management in the economy,”⁹¹ the individual body was subject to a whole series of disciplinary measures—it is thus not a stretch to claim that it was called upon to manage itself. In the film *Tito and Me* (1992), ten-year-old Zoran is

coming of age in 1954, starting by learning how to regulate his own bodily urges. Underscored in the film's opening scenes is a defining feature of Yugoslav family life: the elimination of private property led to crowded domestic spaces and a lack of privacy.

Taunted for being overweight, weak, small, as well as for having an obsession with Tito and a tendency to eat plaster, Zoran is subjected to a series of humiliations after winning a contest that takes him on a "march" to the leader's birthplace with the Communist youth brigade. However, the hike through the Croatian wilderness (to reenact the experiences of the partisans during wartime) proves to be too physically demanding. The boy is quickly accused of being an inadequate "young pioneer" and even of attempting to sabotage the march. Predictably, the film ends with Zoran's disillusionment. From the initial scene focusing on bathroom etiquette in an overcrowded apartment to Zoran's mimicking of Tito's hand gestures on screen, the narrative focuses on the disconnect between the leader's self-fashioning as a strongman and the boy's continual (and subversive) failure to live up to the demands placed on him by various authority figures. Dušan Makavejev's *Innocence Unprotected* (1968) addresses itself to a similar problematic. In a far more explicit way, we are confronted with the Yugoslav fashioning of the body as an effective producer through a repetition of gestures meant to strengthen the specific structure at play. Makavejev's film combines actual footage of a 1942 melodrama starring popular strongman Dragoljub Aleksić with interviews with the actors 25 years later.

Interspersed with awkwardly framed shots of Aleksić performing feats of strength such as biting through metal chains are incongruent bits of wartime news footage. The actors that are being interviewed are predictably unaware of the parodic appeal of their film.

Coincidentally, at the same historical moment when Abramović nearly lost her life in the “firestar,” nationalism was beginning to play a renewed role in the framework of the self-managing republic. In the wake of the Croatian Spring of 1971, state policy regarding the suppression of nationalism was beginning to shift. Art developments in most parts of the country were mirroring broader trends. Through the influence of Fluxus, Textualism and Neo-Dada, Belgrade artists sought an alternative to modernism by experimenting with sound environments, performances and happenings, body art and land art. The often-cited origin story of Yugoslav conceptual and performance art revolves around key visiting figures at the Student Cultural Centre, including Joseph Beuys and Joseph Kosuth, as well as artists from neighbouring countries. Focusing on similar concerns, the Croatian conceptual group *Gorgona* produced little in the way of material objects, “[seeking] neither work nor result in art,” and focusing instead on a “recognition of the absurd, of emptiness, [on] monotonous aesthetic categories, a tendency toward nihilism and metaphysical irony.”⁹² As a collective, *Gorgona* lasted from 1959 to 1966. The Zagreb art scene, much like the Belgrade one, was dominated by a variety of approaches to action

painting, optical and kinetic art, as well as Art Informel, most of which were provincial replicas of international trends.

The discovery of oriental philosophy in the 1960s—in the form of Zen Buddhism as interpreted by John Cage, Yves Klein, La Monte Young, and others—led to researches drawing upon Fluxus, Arte Povera, and the Dadaist tradition. The influence of Piero Manzoni, who exhibited in Zagreb’s *New Tendencies* in 1961, was significant. Arte Povera’s attitude toward quotidian and often biological materials, in addition to the more general treatment of media *as media*, was formative in this milieu. The thematic of the tension between materiality and immateriality came to the fore in a myriad of ways. One notable example is the multitude of “unrealized” projects by Ivan Kožarić, whose *Collective Work* from 1963 included the idea “to make casts of the insides of automobiles, apartments, stables, of the interior of a park, in general, of all important hollows in town.”⁹³ Long before Rachel Whiteread made a cast of the interior of an Edwardian house, Kožarić envisioned the hypothetical casting of literally *everything*; not only did this project cite a seemingly interminable series of everyday sites, both natural and non-natural, but it also sought to transmute positive plenitude into negative, empty space.

While the vocabulary may have been a borrowed one in this case, what bears further scrutiny is the emphasis on spirituality, immateriality and emptiness in an environment that valued productivity and plenitude. Keeping in mind that such works were made during a period in which domestic space was in short supply, their

spiritualist aspect takes on more specific connotations. Sound, for example, has long played a key part in Abramović's production, and was used to great effect in pieces such as *Forest* (1972)—in which visitors were asked to imagine that they were in a forest and write down their impressions—and *Airport* (1972)—in which a waiting room ambience was created by replaying a fictional boarding announcement for a flight leaving for Tokyo, Bangkok, and Hong Kong—and *Sound Corridor* (1971)—in which visitors were barraged by the amplified sound of machine gun fire as they crossed a narrow white corridor. Dispensing with the need for the performing body, most of these pieces were created in rooms that were empty save for sound equipment. Eliminating the exhibition space, the sound installation *Tree* (1971) consisted of recorded bird sounds that were played for passers-by. This last piece is notable for the fact that it took place in a public setting. Were such interventions not a direct affront to both the proliferation of bourgeois kitsch and socialist material culture? Recalling the earlier discussion of the Praxists' valorization of man's consciousness as "something separate from [his] historical and material being,"⁹⁴ is there not an echo of this in the notion of art action as a spiritualizing process? Nonetheless, key differences remained. The basic concept of activity as a nexus of social transformation remained consistent. What was different was *the directing of action towards the non-productive*.

Balkan Art

In 2005, Abramović released *Balkan Erotic Epic*, a 13-minute film in which the artist and a group of performers created a series of actions based on ancient fertility rituals from the region. Going hand in hand with the recuperation of practices from the 1960s and 1970s were new works identified with a contemporary “Balkan Art.” Up until a few years ago, most of the critics who responded to the phenomenon of Balkan Art tended to view it in a favourable light. Balkan Art was sometimes seen as a harmless *terminus technicus* for establishing relations in an international context,⁹⁵ and at other times as a necessary and critical tool for promoting a regionalization of Europe.⁹⁶ Coinciding with the Orientalization of the region,⁹⁷ the appearance of “Balkanism” in literary discourse was accompanied by new display and marketing strategies. The problem now will be to determine if the reenactment of *Lips of Thomas* was in any way related to this trend. What are we to make, for example, of the addition of such elements as a white flag, heavy boots, a partisan cap, and the Russian song *Slavic Souls* to the ascetic original? The resurgence of Eastern European art in the West begs for a reconsideration of such details.

Tanja Ostojić’s web project, *Looking for a Husband with an EU Passport* (2000-2002)⁹⁸ is an example of the kind of works that may have inadvertently helped to strengthen this trend. While the piece culminated with Ostojić’s marriage—not long after the artist posted a nude self-portrait on the web and exchanged hundreds of letters with prospective husbands from Western Europe—its implicit focus was on

the artist's failure to obtain permission to live and work in Germany. Referenced here is the recognition of the rich legacy of "Eastern" body art, associated with artists such as Abramović; the rigid redrawing of national borders for the region's inhabitants, set against the myth of European integration; the interconnectedness of gender, capital and art; the exploitative Orientalization of the Balkan female body; and the West's paternalistic relation to its Eastern periphery. In the next section, I will briefly explore this trend in greater detail, arguing that, by essentializing the artists' position, a specifically "Balkan Art" enacts the classic mythologizing gesture which reduces history to nature, neutralizes contradictions, and levels the complex to the simple. Saidian terminology has been used extensively in this regard. Part of the impetus for Maria Todorova's *Imagining the Balkans* came from a desire to respond to the well-known pejorative term denoting the fragmentation of concrete political and geographical units into smaller and less viable ones.⁹⁹

Cited judiciously, Orientalism can help to describe how the Balkans traditionally functioned as the "fulcrum of enlightened Europe's self-image."¹⁰⁰ Grafted indiscriminately, however, Saidian critique is simply not specialized enough. "Orientalism can be applied within Europe, between Europe proper and those parts of the continent that were under Ottoman (hence Oriental) rule," writes Milica Bakić-Hayden. "This older symbolic geography was reinforced in the post-war (cold war) period by an ideological and political geography of the democratic, capitalist west versus the totalitarian, communist east."¹⁰¹ The discourse of Balkanism was first used

negatively in the aftermath of the wars and later came to signify an unchanging state located outside of civilized European norms. Orientalism refers to a representational regime, a continuity of Othering and its representational logic. It is thus perfectly logical that, as Bakić-Hayden has claimed, communism supplements rather than replaces Orientalism as a marker of the East's inferiority.¹⁰² I will suggest, however, that this conflation needs to be problematized at the level of representation.

Two other notions deserve a brief mention. Bakić-Hayden introduced the popular trope of “nesting orientalisms” in 1995 to describe the different internal divisions within the same ethnic group (reminiscent of Todorova's differences *within* types).¹⁰³ Naturally, such a mechanism for the production of Othering is ultimately unstable: the mutual orientalizing required to build phantasmic identities can only be sustained by looking back to a glorious past and rejecting the realities of a multinational, post-communist present.¹⁰⁴ Marxist historians in particular have stressed that Balkan borders were drawn in “the smoky conference rooms of imperialist powers,” adding that the local bourgeoisies were dependent upon the support of either Russian paternalism or Hapsburg imperialism. The artificiality of nation-building is often emphasized in this regard, with nationalism emerging as a contingent product of bourgeois revolutions and a shared history of capitalist economic formations.¹⁰⁵

Since Yugoslavia functioned as a kind of neutralizing structure, this environment imposed a very specific set of pressures on artists. Significantly, there was a great deal of difference between exhibitions of central and Southeastern

European art from the 1990s and the subsequent “big Balkan shows” after 2000. While Orientalism did not figure as a framing device for the first group, the second group embraced it as a marketing category. Shows such as *Europa, Europa: The Century of the Avantgarde in Central and Eastern Europe* (Bonn, 1994) were primarily recuperative projects citing the European avant-gardes as a necessary point of reference. In contrast, the thematic shift that occurred with shows such as *Blood & Honey: the Future is in the Balkans* (Klosterneuburg, 2003) left allusions to both communism and post-communism far behind. While the exhibitions from the 1990s were engaging in a dialogue with the Western canon—with Europe standing in a paternalistic relation to its periphery—the Balkan exhibitions were playing explicitly into Western geopolitical interests by attempting to mediate difference. From one perspective, these texts may have been deployed in order to legitimate the curators’ goals.

Organized five years after the fall of the Berlin wall, Bonn’s *Europa, Europa*¹⁰⁶ was a milestone exhibition of works from both Central Europe and the Eastern Bloc. Curators Ryszard Stanislawski and Christoph Brockhaus, Polish and German respectively, were anxious to catalogue autonomous avant-garde experiments that were developing alongside Socialist Realisms in traditionalist or repressive environments. In spite of the curators’ deconstructive ambitions, however, the show focused less on geopolitical differences than on uncovering “universal” qualities in the art, positing Western Europe as a point of reference. Four years in

preparation, *Europa, Europa*, featured 200 artists. Czech, Hungarian and Yugoslav Surrealisms, for example, were strongly represented; Frantisek Kupka's abstractions (1910-20) were juxtaposed with those of more canonic figures like Kandinsky.

Exhibition reviewers latched onto the omissions, finding them equally intriguing as the inclusions.¹⁰⁷ The exclusion of art from East Germany, for example, can probably be attributed to the territory's ambiguous status as the East *within* the West. This would have problematized the co-curators' goals, whose whole premise relied on the existence of an imaginary frontier cleaving the continent in half. Coinciding with the ascent of Berlin as a local centre and the concurrent rise of Germany in the European political and economic landscape, the show's monolithic ambitions left it vulnerable to critique. Some Western reviewers were tentative with their reproaches, preferring to read the future as suspended somewhere between "a dialogue between equal partners" and "a gradual drift towards assimilation."¹⁰⁸ Others, including Polish scholar and curator Piotr Piotrowski, were far less generous: "If the threshold of World War II justified the geographical division of Europe into two parts," he claims, "there were indeed few convincing arguments to apply it retrospectively to all of the twentieth century."¹⁰⁹ For critics like Piotrowski, then, such an essentializing division was largely ideological, serving to mask a political bias. "*Europa-Europa* [basically] submitted Central European art for Western inspection using the supervisor's value system," he writes, "[in order to show] that there was no 'other Europe,' just Europe."¹¹⁰

Beyond Belief: Contemporary Art from East Central Europe in Chicago

(1995) and *After the Wall* in Stockholm (1999) were two other exhibitions in a similar vein.¹¹¹ Piotrowski's critique of these shows hinges on their implicitly political nature as providers of closure in a post-communist Europe. The defining non-alignment of former Yugoslavia between East and West enabled its artists to fit seamlessly into all of these projects, even ones that focused exclusively on the Eastern bloc. The implications of such framing are crucial in the context of the later "balkanizing" perceptions: whether they were doing so apprehensively or nostalgically, Western curators were still engaging with a complicated and plural history. The ideological slippage between *post-communism* and *post-colonialism* embodied by the "supervisor's value system" had not yet given way to an overt Orientalization of the Balkans, even if the foundations were already laid.

Certainly, the relationship between the texts and the exhibitions was far from clear-cut: whereas the scholars claimed to be citing Said in a critical way in order to tackle some of the complexities of the region, the marketing of a specifically "Balkan Art" seemed to hinge on an essentializing designation. Large-scale shows such as *In Search of Balkania* (Graz, 2002) and *In the Gorges of the Balkans: A Report* (Kassel, 2003) were framed differently than earlier surveys of Eastern and Middle European art. If the organizers of the latter situated the artists in relation to post-communism and the history of the Western avant-gardes (while alluding to a paternalistic relationship

between Europe and its periphery), the curators of the former treated post-communism as a largely exhausted category.

In spite of their essentializing premises, however, not all of the early exhibitions were as ideologically invested as *Europa, Europa* and *Beyond Belief*. Slovenian curator Zdenka Badinovac's important *Body and the East* (1999) eschewed the Central European framework while retaining and even romanticizing the communist and post-communist one. The project was envisaged as a recovery of both marginalized and ephemeral practices involving body art actions that seemed to flourish in repressive conditions. Badinovac's recuperative project, it would follow, depended upon the premise that a "complete" recovery akin to that in the West was actually impossible.

Nostalgia, Cynical Reason, *Russia!*

What role did nostalgia play in all this? It is well-known, for example, that Joseph Beuys was anxious to mine the material culture of Eastern Europe, or what remained of it, as a potential source of subversive energy.¹¹² The classic example of this remains the installation, *Economic Values* (1980), consisting of shelves displaying a variety of domestic products specific to that context, their perishable contents eventually replaced by a mixture of sand and chalk to preserve their shape and weight. The work also included one of Beuys's own sculptures, a small plaster cast with damaged edges "repaired" with butter. The piece was to be completed with paintings gleaned from the collection of the particular museum that displayed it; these were to correspond to dates in the life of Karl Marx, and were to be framed in gold. Built into Beuys's method was an emphasis on the integrity and biological purity of materials that are constantly in flux. That the GDR foodstuffs physically transformed over time was a welcome consequence, signaling decay as return. The East returned here as a wholesome spectre, one capable of regenerating an ailing culture by challenging its value system.

Clearly, Beuys's *Economic Values* invokes a distinct material culture. Yet, in Boris Buden's assessment of the 1989 Revolution (an event characterized for Habermas by its belatedness), communism has never been characterized by a "particular culture."¹¹³ The nostalgic movement to restore an old Russia therefore played directly into the desire of post-communist nations to catch up to the West in

both constitutional and economic terms, a desire symbolically celebrated in the fall of the Berlin Wall. The irony that the *genuine* revolution embodied in the collapse of state socialism failed to bring about anything new is seen as a tragic development. “Culture has completely absorbed everything that used to be our social, political, or historical experience...” Buden writes, “we know very well that the communist past belongs to both Eastern and Western Europe...yet we don’t have the conceptual means to recall this past as such.”¹¹⁴ Regardless of whether or not Buden exaggerates in denying an entire horizon of experience *not* based in culture, the notion of an impossible common past for Europe is a sound one. Vilnius-based artist and filmmaker Deimantas Narkevicius goes even further in accounting for this lack by claiming that communism failed to leave a unitary imprint simply because it never existed as such in the first place.¹¹⁵

Fetishized yet impossible, the emphasis on such an object points to the enduring theme of a common loss that continues to surface in European art exhibited on the global circuit has a distinctly different resonance for those from the West compared with those from the East. “Beuys’s fetishization of the GDR is part and parcel of his artwork’s disavowal of real history,”¹¹⁶ writes Charity Scribner in *Requiem for Communism* (2003), pointing to Beuys’s attachment to the failed *as failed*, a valorization of the impossible beyond mere nostalgia. Following in this tradition, a number of curators in the former GDR have turned the products of dismantled state industries into a museological haven for the obsolete, exhibiting

everything from extra sturdy kitchen appliances to prematurely disintegrating food wrappers and paper products. Curator and historian Andreas Ludwig founded the Open Depot in the Eastern town of Eisenbuttenstadt in the early 1990s, envisioning the project as a way of “grounding German identities in the material objects and structures that remain behind.”¹¹⁷ Unlike the site-specific display of Open Depot, on the other hand, Beuys’s piece has only ever been exhibited in the West.

In Abramović’s case, the spectre of *Russia!* hangs quite literally over the performance arena at the Guggenheim—a fact that the artist used to her advantage. The simplified premise that art in Eastern Europe was politicized merely by virtue of its “decentralized positioning” and illicit, dissident role may in fact be masking the specificity of the milieu in which Abramović began to work. The ominous yet joyful announcement of *Russia!*—an exhibition, ironically, comprising of European paintings from imperial collections—may have suggested to some viewers the interchangeability of totalitarianisms, being evocative of everything from impossible material conditions and suppressions of unofficial culture to baroque sensibilities and violent, excessive emotions. The decision to embellish the ascetic *Lips of Thomas* with Yugoslav symbols may have been intended to play off these associations. In contrast to Beuys’s celebration of decaying products from the GDR, Abramović’s use of highly charged props is more ambiguous.

Another comparison might also be considered: when it comes to raiding the repertoire of socialist culture, no one is equal to Laibach and IRWIN of the Neue

Slowenische Kunst and their self-styled totalitarian antics. Resolved to always produce art as a collective, the activities of the NSK range from performing rock music steeped in Stalinist and Fascist imagery (Laibach) to issuing stamps as part of a micro-state (IRWIN). Paradigmatic of their activities was the 1987 poster scandal: entering a national contest for designing the best poster for Tito's birthday, or the Day of Youth, the Slovenian New Collectivists, NSK's graphic designers, merely adapted an existing 1930s Nazi original by Richard Klein. After their winning poster was widely reproduced in the media, the resulting fallout included a lengthy investigation that culminated in the dismissal of the case in court. Although, ostensibly, there was not enough evidence, the atmosphere in the country had shifted enough for the already incongruous Youth Day celebration to be abolished a mere year later.

In contrast to the deliberate self-mythologizing of Beuys or Abramović, the NSK have adhered to the same collective agenda since the 1980s, long after the collapse of state socialism. Part of the discomfort surrounding their activities appears to stem from an uncertainty about their intent. Slavoj Žižek cleverly explains the problem while simultaneously critiquing the *cynical reason* animating much Eastern European art. He argued that, since the initial response of the Leftist critic was to interpret the activities of Laibach as an ironic play on totalitarian ritual, this interpretation was accompanied by a fear that the artists were overestimating their public and perhaps even identifying with the ritual themselves.¹¹⁸ However, Žižek

then reverses the terms to present another possibility: rather than representing a subversive attitude, what if cynical distance were the very ingredient required for the system to function, a sign of conformity, with the apparent disavowal of ideology serving as its phantasmatic support?

For Žižek, cynical distance serves as the binding agent in a falsely post-ideological universe. Laibach's intention thus becomes to "[frustrate] the system...precisely insofar as it is not its ironic imitation, but over-identification with it—by bringing to light [its] obscene superego underside..."¹¹⁹ From this perspective, the NSK would appear to be operating on a level well beyond the limited arena of parodic inversions. Their strategy of combining imagery from multiple totalitarian vocabularies without differentiating them becomes part of an effort to "frustrate" by replicating the transferential relationship in analysis and making the viewer realize that the answer about the truth of his or her desire cannot be found in the Big Other.¹²⁰ It is in this sense that a viewer's excessive anxiety about Laibach's imagery can be made a central focus of their work. In fact, NSK's use of political emblems positions them as ideal critics of "enlightened false consciousness,"¹²¹ even if their proximity to propaganda and satire might appear, at first glance, to be aligning them with it. Can something similar be claimed of the displacement of context at work in the new *Lips of Thomas*? The very nature of *Seven Easy Pieces* as an endurance spectacle would seem to support this possibility; the same can be said of the mind-numbing repetition of communist symbols and body art gestures that are often

violent. Another thing to consider would be the possible role of cynical distance in the discourse around the activities of the artists working in and around Belgrade's Student Cultural Centre. Not only would this call into question the unproblematically dissident status of body art in a milieu that was willing to accommodate it, but it might also better illuminate the workings of a socialism which invoked culture in order to differentiate itself from its Eastern counterpart.

It is thus always critical to consider precisely *whose* experiences and memories are animating the discourse around such works. Joseph Beuys, it will be remembered, made allusions to GDR material culture as an outsider. While Laibach and the NSK operate primarily from Ljubljana, their work, especially in recent years, is implicitly addressed to the West. And, while the now historical phenomenon of Balkan Art may, in one sense, have functioned as a strategic diplomatic tool, the intrusion (or deliberate incorporation) of *Russia!* into *Seven Easy Pieces* rendered these problems visible in a more complicated way.

Beuys's *How to Explain Pictures to a Dead Hare*: Productive Emptiness and the Ritual of Museum Spectacle

Originally performed in a gallery closed off to the public, *Explaining Pictures to a Dead Hare* (1965) involved Beuys murmuring inaudible explanations to the animal while viewers watched through a glass window. With his head covered in honey and gold leaf, and his shoes resting on felt and metal soles, Beuys deliberately excluded his audience, making the hare the sole recipient of an incomprehensible secret. “Human ability is not to produce honey, but to think, to produce ideas,”¹²² the artist claimed. In Rudolph Steiner’s anthroposophic parlance, the hare alluded to “reincarnation through the earth whose language is spoken by the master.”¹²³ The honey and gold represented a kind of “regenerated intellectualism” lacking in the assembled public.¹²⁴

Reviving an old category, Slavoj Žižek’s tripartite narrative of ideology can help to illuminate the specific structure at work in this piece. Žižek’s elaboration of this concept postulates that the only truly non-ideological position lies beyond the realm of the symbolic. In this schema, *doctrine* is a proposition or set of propositions that conceals a vested interest; *belief* refers to an ideology’s external manifestations and apparatuses; and *ritual* designates internalized doctrine that assumes a certain spontaneity. In *The Plague of Fantasies*, Žižek draws on Pascal to explain how distance is maintained towards a ritual even when belief has already taken root. “If you do not believe, kneel down, act as if you believe, and belief will come by itself,”

Pascal instructs,¹²⁵ a similar dynamic is at work in Marxian commodity fetishism, which involves what Žižek calls a “purely material sincerity”¹²⁶ functioning as the locus of a specific phantasmatic structure. In this context, material practice can be distinguished from crude conditioning through its paradoxical status as “belief before belief”—the formal act of obeying a custom allows one to recognize what has already been internalized.¹²⁷ As soon as Žižek’s narrative of ideology is tested against Abramović’s reenactment of Beuys, however, a different scenario emerges: to enact the motions of the ritual fails to instill belief in this case. Instead, the re-performance dislocates the ideological field at play in the original.

Regarding Beuys’s project as a whole, critics have tended to emphasize the artist’s relative unconcern with the past, his insistence on the total recuperation of meaning, and his apparent displacement of German history.¹²⁸ However, Abramović’s timely displacement of Beuys’s cosmological project actually coincided with recent efforts to recuperate the object-based practice after the virulent assault on the mythos in the 1980s. In a round table following Beuys’s 1979 Guggenheim retrospective, the editors of *October* addressed the lack of political efficacy in the artist’s use of key avant-garde ideas, latching onto his articulation of his own project. Benjamin Buchloh makes a theological allusion: claiming that “the construction of meaning for Beuys depends upon the construction of belief,” he characterizes his followers in the Dusseldorf Academy as “true believers.”¹²⁹

Although far from assuming the position of a shamanistic teacher, Abramović's focus on transformation through liminal experience is not incompatible with Beuys's valorization of art as a vehicle for healing the social body. Like Abramović, the artist often selected simple, unstable materials from which forms had yet to emerge. However, while the development of man's spiritual faculties is seen by both artists as distinct from material reality, Abramović has a different strategy in mind: "I don't believe in Beuys, that living through art we can change society," she admits, concluding that deep spirituality is the only solution.¹³⁰ If Beuys taught that creativity is a resurrective force that will eventually result in the transformation of "the social body by man-turned-artist,"¹³¹ then, for Abramović, a utopian (Eastern) community necessarily precludes the creation and display of art, since such an activity is merely a means to achieve a *temporary* emptying-out of the mind. It would follow that a more enduring state of non-suffering is accessible only through meditation.

Nonetheless, in spite of the transcendentalist claims of both artists, a different kind of emptying-out was at work in the repeated piece: rather than retaining its mythological aura, this recreation functioned as a kind of deliberate spectacle, allowing the setting to emerge as an ideological space concerned with recuperation and capital. This is not to say that the work embodied, and thus inadvertently exposed, the emptiness of this spectacle as such. Rather, the rich backdrop of associations—put in motion by the charged announcement of *Russia!*, for example—opens up a new way of expanding the discussion of body art. Here we are confronted with the problem of

documenting ephemeral actions by artists who were fully aware of the works' eventual status as images; the reclaiming of performance art territory after its conquest by video and new media; the displacement of spiritualist gestures which were not necessarily evacuated of political meaning the first time around; a complicated allusion to irony, satire, cynical reason, and the marketing strategies around "Balkan Art"; and an awareness of the spaces and structures, both material and ideological, in which various gestures take place.

Undoubtedly, there are always viewers who are open to the possibility of an affective experience. Yet the title of *Seven Easy Pieces* would seem to allude to a *draining* of affect, an emptiness that is uninflected by parody or pastiche. In the quintessential 1970 film, *Five Easy Pieces*, the character played by Jack Nicholson proves that it is possible to move others even when one plays Chopin mechanically, without feeling. It is in the same sense that we should understand those who claim that Abramović's Beuys is "utterly sincere."¹³² As a historical return, *How to Explain Pictures to a Dead Hare* is neither sincere nor ironic, neither nostalgic nor recuperative, neither tragedy nor farce.¹³³ Departing somewhat from the artist's own articulation of her project, Abramović's longstanding engagement with body-art becomes a crucial marker in a time when documentation has become a central paradigm of contemporary practice. The logic of a repetition that produces difference creates a productive space in which even miscommunication can become fluent; it is

as if every act of translation already guards against a transparent reproduction of the same.

Endnotes

¹ I am thinking of *Life, Once More: Forms of Reenactment in Contemporary Art* which was curated by Sven Lütticken and ran from January 27 to March 28, 2005, at Witte de With in Rotterdam. *Biography* (1993) featured the first re-performance of *Lips of Thomas* and was staged at various theatres and opera houses.

² Marina Abramović and Germano Celant, *Public Body: Installations and Objects 1965-2001* (Milan: Charta, 2001), 28.

³ Abramović and Celant, 28.

⁴ Abramović and Celant, 59.

⁵ Marina Abramović et al., *Marina Abramovic: Seven Easy Pieces* (Milan: Charta, 2001), 89.

⁶ “This simple structure was transformed each night for each piece until in the end, the circle was literally elevated towards the spiral, towards the spiritual.” Marina Abramović and Nancy Spector, “Interview,” in *Marina Abramovic: Seven Easy Pieces* (Milan: Charta, 2007), 30.

⁷ Performed in Naples at the Galleria Studio Mora in 1974, Abramović set a table with various objects, any of which could be used by members of the audience—the performance was interrupted when someone threatened to fire the loaded gun.

⁸ Peggy Phelan, *Unmarked: The Politics of Performance* (London and New York: Routledge, 1993), 146.

⁹ Phelan, 147.

¹⁰ Phelan, 148.

¹¹ Frazer Ward, “The Haunted Museum: Institutional Critique and Publicity,” *October* 73 (1995): 80.

¹² Gilles Deleuze, *Difference and Repetition*, trans. Paul Patton (New York: Columbia University Press, 1994), 5.

¹³ Deleuze, 5.

¹⁴ Deleuze, 5.

¹⁵ Deleuze, 10-15.

¹⁶ Soren Kierkegaard, *Kierkegaard's Writings: Fear and Trembling/ Repetition v. 6*, trans. Edna and Howard Hong (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1983), 131.

¹⁸ Amelia Jones, *Body Art/Performing the Subject* (Minneapolis and London: University of Minnesota Press, 1998), 21.

¹⁹ Amelia Jones, *Self/Image: Technology, Representation, and the Contemporary Subject* (London and New York: Routledge, 2006), 82.

²⁰ Mary Kelly, "Sexual Politics," in *Art and Politics: Proceedings of a Conference on Art and Politics held on 15th and 16th April, 1977*, ed. Brandon Taylor (Hampshire: Winchester School of Arts Press, 1977), 67.

²¹ Jones, *Body Art/Performing the Subject*, 23.

²² Jones, *Body Art/Performing the Subject*, 27.

²³ Jones, *Body Art/Performing the Subject*, 34.

²⁴ Jones, *Body Art/Performing the Subject*, 25.

²⁵ Peggy Phelan, "Marina Abramović: Witnessing Shadows," *Theatre Journal* 56, no. 4 (2004): 571.

²⁶ Martha Wilson, "Performance Art: (some) Theory and (Selected) Practice at the End of this Century," *Art Journal* 56, no. 4 (1997): 2.

²⁷ Wilson, 2.

²⁸ "This is the piece I had done fifteen years before, in which I combed my hair with a brush and really hurt myself, showing a very disturbing image that is the opposite of beauty. The five girls sat in a row and simultaneously repeated my actions." Kaplan, 7.

²⁹ This is the original context of the comment: "Then I got an invitation from 5 young artists in Poland to come and see a performance called *Marina Positions*—at first I was really angry but when I was watching the piece I thought it was fantastic and I understood that the idea of originality as 'my-ego-my-art' is completely an obstacle to the essence of performance." Oddly enough, the artists are in Poland in this version of the story. Marina Abramović and Katy Deepwell. "N. Paradoxa Interview with Marina Abramovic." *N. Paradoxa: international feminist art journal* 10, no. 2 (1997). <http://web.ukonline.co.uk/n.paradoxa/abramov.htm>.

³⁰ Abramović's initial flash of anger was somewhat mitigated by the fact that the artists had at least credited the original performance. Such a thing, the artist points out in 1997, is not always the case: "The younger generation does seem ignorant or they don't want to know the work of the 70s because they repeat the same ideas...and many young critics don't refer to the earlier work for comparison, which is unfair." Abramović and Deepwell.

³¹ It is with this formulation in mind that we must read the following remark: "You absolutely have to respect the originality of the piece and ask the living artist for the permission. You can do whatever you want after that." Indeed, why was it necessary for Abramović to dictate the rules for redoing works that are ephemeral and repeatable by definition? Why is permission needed if the piece is "open like Mozart"? Abramović and Deepwell.

³² Kristine Stiles, "Aktionshose: Genitalpanik (Action Pants: Genital Panic)," *VALIE EXPORT: Ob/De+Con(struction)*, ed. Robert Fleck et al. Philadelphia: The Galleries at Moore, 2000. <http://thegalleriesatmoore.org/publications/valie/valietour5.shtml>.

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- ³³ Philip Monk, "Mike Kelley and Paul McCarthy: Collaborative Works," *Indepth Arts News* (2000). <http://www.absolutearts.com/artsnews/2000/03/28/26760.html>.
- ³⁴ Richard Dyer, *Pastiche* (London: Routledge, 2007), 2-4.
- ³⁵ Pierre Bourdieu, "The Field of Cultural Production," *The Field of Cultural Production: Essays on Art and Literature* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1993), 31.
- ³⁶ Bourdieu, 31.
- ³⁷ Hal Foster, *Design and Crime (and Other Diatribes)* (London and New York: Verso, 2002), 137.
- ³⁸ As Foster explains, the two generations interact through a process in which "the first [helps] to charge the second" and "the second to frame the first," so that both periods are transformed in a reciprocal way. Foster, 133.
- ³⁹ Foster, *Design and Crime*, 141.
- ⁴⁰ Chrissie Iles, "The Body in Video Installation with Specific Reference to the Three New Video Installations by Marina Abramovic: Cleaning the Mirror I, II, III," in *Abramovic: Artist Body: Performance 1969-1998*, ed. Chrissie Iles (Milan: Charta, 1998), 328.
- ⁴¹ Researched and recorded entirely at the Pitt Rivers Museum, the video work consists of five stacked monitors, each showing a different portion of a skeleton being vigorously scrubbed with a floor brush. The two pieces that follow show the artist lying down with the skeleton on top of her, as well as performing with various ritualistic objects from the museum.
- ⁴² Iles, 328.
- ⁴³ Robert C. Morgan, "Touch Sanitation: Mierle Laderman Ukeles," *Community Arts Network* (2006) http://www.communityarts.net/readingroom/archivefiles/2002/09/touch_sanitatio.php.
- ⁴⁴ Morgan.
- ⁴⁵ Morgan.
- ⁴⁶ Heiner Holtappels, "Abramovic, Marina: Art Must be Beautiful, Artist must be beautiful," *Catalogue Netherlands Media Arts Institute* (2006). <http://catalogue.montevideo.nl/art.php?id=4454>.
- ⁴⁷ Morgan.
- ⁴⁸ Marina Abramovic and Ulay, "Imponderabilia," Media Art Net, <http://www.medienkunstnetz.de/works/imponderabilia/>.
- ⁴⁹ Duncan writes that "the invention of aesthetics can be understood as transference of spiritual values from the sacred realm into secular time and space." Carol Duncan, "The Art Museum as Ritual," *Civilizing Rituals: Inside Public Art Museums* (London and New York: Routledge, 1995), 14.

⁵⁰ There are plenty of statements that allude to the persistence of patriarchy: “In the Balkans, the relation of the mother to the son is very different from that to the female child. Female children have to work. The male will stay home and the mother does everything for him—she irons his shirts, cooks for him, for all his life. When my brother came to Amsterdam, it didn't even cross his mind that he could do something. For two years he was watching CNN, complaining about Yugoslavia, writing his philosophical text and complaining that I work too much. His little daughter went to school in Amsterdam, and I took care of both of them for two years. I'd had it...” Marina Abramovic and Laurie Anderson, “Interview with Marina Abramovic,” *BombMagazine*. 8, no. 4 (2003). <http://bombsite.com/tocsum03.html>.

⁵¹ “Ustvari, eliminacija spolnog stereotipa u zapošljavanju mora biti jedan od glavnij ciljeva modern, progresivne i socijalističke politike.” (“In truth, the elimination of a superficial stereotype in employment must be one of the main goals of a modern, progressive and socialist politics.”) Bogdan Denić, *Kriza Jugoslavenskog Socijalizma* (Zagreb: August Cesarec, 1990), 109.

⁵² Piotr Piotrowski, “Male Artist’s Body: National Identity vs. Identity Politics,” *Primary Documents: A Sourcebook for Eastern and Central European Art since the 1950s*, ed. Laura Hoptman and Thomas Pospiszyl (New York: The Museum of Modern Art, 2002), 227.

⁵³ Piotrowski, 227.

⁵⁴ Leonida Kovac, “[Im]possible Photographs,” *Impossible Histories: Historical Avant-gardes, Neo-avant-gardes and Post-avant-gardes in Yugoslavia, 1918-1991*, ed. Dubravka Djurić and Miško Šuvaković (Cambridge and London: The MIT Press, 2003), 286.

⁵⁵ Peggy Phelan, “Marina Abramović: Witnessing Shadows,” *Theatre Journal* 56, no. 4 (2004): 569-70.

⁵⁶ Reuben and Maja Fowkes, “Indie Art of the Seventies,” *Umelec International Contemporary Art and Culture* (2006). <http://www.divus.cz/umelec/en/pages/umelec.php?id=1029&roc=2006&cis=1#clanek>.

⁵⁷ Zdenka Badinovac, ed. *Body and the East: from the 1960s to the present* (Cambridge and London: The MIT Press, 1998). <http://mitpress.mit.edu/catalog/item/default.asp?type=2&tid=3707>.

⁵⁸ This is Iveković’s full description of the piece: “The action takes place on the day of the President’s visit to the city, and it develops as intercommunication between three persons: 1. a person on the roof of a tall building across the street from my apartment; 2. myself, on the balcony; 3. a policeman in the street in front of the house. Due to the cement construction of the balcony, only the person on the roof can actually see me and follow the action. My assumption is that this person has binoculars and a walkie-talkie apparatus. I notice that the policeman in the street also has a walkie-talkie. The action begins when I walk out onto the balcony and sit on a chair, I sip whiskey, read a book, and make gestures as if I perform masturbation. After a period of time, the policeman rings my doorbell and orders the persons and objects are to be removed from the balcony.” “Sanja Iveković, Museum of Contemporary Art, Zagreb 1998,” Media Art Net. <http://www.medienkunstnetz.de/works/triangle/>.

⁵⁹ Abramović and Spector, 15.

⁶⁰ Pierre Bourdieu, "The Field of Cultural Production," *The Field of Cultural Production: Essays on Art and Literature* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1993), 7.

⁶¹ Bourdieu, 6.

⁶² Bourdieu, 7.

⁶³ Bojana Pejić, "Being-in-the-Body: On the Spiritual in Marina Abramovic's Art," ed. Friedrich Meschede (Stuttgart: Edition Cantz, 1993), 26.

⁶⁴ Marina Abramović and Janet A. Kaplan. "Deeper and deeper: interview with Marina Abramovic," *Art Journal* 58, no. 2 (1999): 6.

⁶⁵ Abramović and Celant, 13.

⁶⁶ Abramović and Celant, 27.

⁶⁷ Abramović and Kaplan. 6.

⁶⁸ Abramović and Celant, 27.

⁶⁹ Abramović and Kaplan. 7.

⁷⁰ Margaret Morse, "Video Installation Art: The Body, the Image, and the Space in between." *Illuminating Video*, ed. Doug Hall and Sally Jo Fifer (New York: Aperture in association with the Bay Area Video Coalition, 1990), 159.

⁷¹ In 1963, it became the Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia (SFRY).

⁷² Dubravka Djurić and Miško Šuvaković, eds., *Impossible Histories: Historical Avant-gardes, Neo-avant-gardes and Post-avant-gardes in Yugoslavia, 1918-1991* (Cambridge and London: The MIT Press, 2003), 25.

⁷³ The founding figures of the group were Zagreb's Gajo Petrović and Milan Kangrga of Zagreb Belgrade's Mihailo Marković.

⁷⁴ Vranicki Predrag, "On the Problem of Practice," *Praxis* 1 (1965), <http://www.marxists.org/subject/praxis/issue-01/vranicki.htm>.

⁷⁵ Josip Broz Tito, *Tito on Non-Alignment (Tito o Nesvrstanosti)* (Belgrade: Federal Committee for Information, 1976), 25.

⁷⁶ Tito, *On Non-Alignment*, 25.

⁷⁷ James Klugmann, *From Trotsky to Tito* (London: Lawrence & Wishart Ltd., 1951), 23.

⁷⁸ Klugmann, 9.

⁷⁹ See Ross Johnson, *Yugoslavia: the Non-Leninist Succession*. Santa Monica: Rand

Corporation, 1980.

⁸⁰ See, for example, Thomas Oleszczuk, "Group Challenges and Ideological De-Radicalization in Yugoslavia." *Soviet Studies* 32, no. 4 (1980): 563.

⁸¹ Johnson, 283.

⁸² By 1978, a new campaign for collective leadership was launched, involving three principal components: the annual "rotation of leadership positions" was accompanied by the "collective responsibility by sectors" as well as the "creation of regularized procedures for the work of leadership organs." Johnson, 284.

⁸³ Oleszczuk, 563.

⁸⁴ Some degree of free market enterprise was allowed internally in what was called Market Socialism.

⁸⁵ Bogdan Trifunović, ed., *A Handbook of Yugoslav Socialist Self-Management* (Belgrade: Socialist Thought and Practice, 1980), 31.

⁸⁶ Milovan Djilas, *Fall of the New Class* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1998), 129.

⁸⁷ Djilas, 19.

⁸⁸ Mihailo Marković, "Čemu Praxis?" *Praxis* 1 (1964), Anarho Sindikalistička Konfederacija (ASK), <http://solidarnost.mahost.org/ZAF-main.htm>.

⁸⁹ Vranicki Predrag, "On the Problem of Practice," *Praxis* 1 (1965), Marxists Internet Archive, <http://www.marxists.org/subject/praxis/issue-01/vranicki.htm>.

⁹⁰ The following is Edvard Kardelj's exact wording: "Destruktivni kriticizam praksisovaca ima dezorijentirajući učinak na] svjesne snage društvenog razvoja [SK], otvarajući širom vrata kriticizmu koji svjesno radi na obnovi ovih ili onih elemenata starog društva." (The destructive criticism of the Praxists has a disorienting effect on the conscious forces of social development (SK), opening the door to criticism that is working consciously towards renewing various aspects of the old society." Dunja Bonacci-Skenderović, "Radio Slobodna Europa o sukobima jugoslavenskih vlasti časopisa Praxis (1972-1975), Centar za politološka istraživanja, 2002-2007, <http://www.cpi.hr/download/links/hr/7290.pdf>.

⁹¹ Bogdan Trifunović, ed., *A Handbook of Yugoslav Socialist Self-Management* (Belgrade: Socialist Thought and Practice, 1980), 49.

⁹² Nena Dimitrijević, "Gorgona: Art as a Way of Existence," *Primary Documents: A Sourcebook for Eastern and Central European Art since the 1950s*, ed. Laura Hoptman and Thomas Pospiszył (New York: The Museum of Modern Art, 2002), 125.

⁹³ Dimitrijević, 137.

⁹⁴ Predrag Vranicki, "On the Problem of Practice," *Praxis* 1 (1965), Marxists Internet Archive, <http://www.marxists.org/subject/praxis/issue-01/vranicki.htm>.

⁹⁵ Boris Buden, a Croatian art critic, supported this view at the SCCA panel discussion in Ljubljana. Borčić, Barbara and Urška Jurman, eds. "Introduction to *What Is to Be Done with "Balkan Art"?"* PlatformaSCCA 4 (2005). <http://www.ljudmila.org/scca/platforma4/intro.htm>.

⁹⁶ This is what Dostena Angelova, French theorist of Bulgarian origin, argued at the same symposium. Borčić and Jurman.

⁹⁷ In "Invention and In(ter)ventions: The Rhetoric of Balkanization," Vesna Goldsworthy gives a good example: before the NATO bombing raids were launched in 1999, the American president employed a well-worn seismological metaphor to describe the situation in Kosovo. The surrounding area was described with allusions to "ancient hatreds," Westerns democratic allies, religious clashes, and fracture zones. Vesna Goldsworthy, "Invention and In(ter)ventions: The Rhetoric of Balkanization." *Balkan as Metaphor: Between Globalization and Fragmentation*, ed. Bjelić, I. Dušan and Savić, Obrad (Cambridge and London: The MIT Press, 2002), 25.

⁹⁸ Tanja Ostojic, "Looking for a Husband with an EU Passport," Capital and Gender," <http://www.scca.org.mk/capital/projects/tanja/>.

⁹⁹ Maria Todorova, *Imagining the Balkans* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997), 35.

¹⁰⁰ Dušan Bjelić and Savić, Obrad, eds., *Balkan as Metaphor: Between Globalization and Fragmentation* (Cambridge and London: The MIT Press, 2002), 9.

¹⁰¹ Milica Bakić-Hayden and Robert M. Hayden, "Orientalist Variations on the Theme "Balkans": Symbolic Geography in Recent Yugoslav Cultural Politics," *Slavic Review* 51, no. 1 (1992): 3.

¹⁰² Bakić-Hayden and Hayden, 4.

¹⁰³ See Milica Bakić-Hayden, "Nesting Orientalisms: The Case of Former Yugoslavia," *Slavic Review* 54, no. 4 (1995): 917-931.

¹⁰⁴ Bakić-Hayden, 923.

¹⁰⁵ Goran M. "A Curse Over The Balkans? – Nationalism and War in ex-Yugoslavia," In Defense of Marxism. International Marxist Tendency, <http://www.marxist.com/curse-nationalism-war-yugoslavia.htm>.

¹⁰⁶ Here is a list of the exhibitions in chronological order: *Europa, Europa: The Century of the Avantgarde in Central and Eastern Europe*, curated by Ryszard Stanislawski and Christoph Brockhaus, Kunst-und Ausstesslungshalle, Bonn (1994), *Beyond Belief: Contemporary Art from East Central Europe*, curated by Laura J. Hoptman, Museum of Contemporary Art, Chicago (1995), *Body and the East: from the 1960s to the Present*, curated by Zdenka Badinovac, Museum of Modern Art, Ljubljana (1998), *After the Wall: Art and Culture in Post-Communist Europe*, curated by Bojana Pejic, Moderna Muzeet, Stockholm (1999), *In Search of Balkania*, curated by Roger Conover, Eda Cufer, Peter Weibel, Neue Galerie, Graz (2002), *Blood & Honey: The Future is in the Balkans*, curated by Harald Szeemann, The Essl Collection, Klosterneuburg, Vienna (2003), *In the Gorges of the Balkans: A Report*, curated by René Block, Kunsthalle, Fridericianum, Kassel (2003).

¹⁰⁷ Why had Stanislawski and Brockhaus neglected to include the Austrian and German influences for Central European artists in the early twentieth-century? And why had they omitted altogether the art of the German Democratic Republic? Here, I am thinking of one review and one essay in particular. Piotr Piotrowski, "Central Europe in the Face of Unification," *Art Margins*, Ivory Tower Media, 2003. <http://www.artmargins.com/content/feature/piotrowski2.html>. Apr. 7 2007, and Elizabeth Clegg, "The 20th-Century Avant-Garde in Central and Eastern Europe. Bonn." *The Burlington Magazine* 136, no. 1097 (1994): 568-569.

¹⁰⁸ Clegg, 568-569.

¹⁰⁹ Piotrowski.

¹¹⁰ Piotrowski.

¹¹¹ The latter exhibition focused on the Eastern bloc exclusively.

¹¹² Charity Scribner, *Requiem for Communism* (Cambridge and London: The MIT Press, 2003), 13.

¹¹³ Boris Buden, "The Revolution of 1989: The Past of Yet Another Illusion," *The Manifesta Decade: Debates on Contemporary Art Exhibitions and Biennials in Post-Wall Europe* (Cambridge: Roomade and the MIT Press, 2005), 119.

¹¹⁴ Buden, 117.

¹¹⁵ Deimantas Narkevicius, "Response to Boris Buden's "The Revolution of 1989: The Past of Yet Another Illusion," *The Manifesta Decade: Debates on Contemporary Art Exhibitions and Biennials in Post-Wall Europe* (Cambridge: Roomade and the MIT Press, 2005), 118.

¹¹⁶ Scribner, 125.

¹¹⁷ Scribner, 33.

¹¹⁸ Slavoj Žižek, "Why are Laibach and NSK not Fascists?" in *Primary Documents: A Sourcebook for Eastern and Central European Art since the 1950s*, ed. Laura Hoptman and Thomas Pospiszyl (New York: The Museum of Modern Art, 2002), 287.

¹¹⁹ Žižek, 287.

¹²⁰ Žižek, 287.

¹²¹ The term belongs to Peter Sloterdijk.

¹²² Abramović et al, *Seven Easy Pieces*, 176.

¹²³ Alan Borer, *The Essential Joseph Beuys* (Cambridge: the MIT Press, 1993), 11.

¹²⁴ Boer, 13.

¹²⁵ Slavoj Žižek, *Plague of Fantasies* (London and New York: Verso, 1997), 6.

¹²⁶ Žižek, 6.

¹²⁷ Slavoj Žižek, *Sublime Object of Ideology* (London and New York: Verso Press, 1989), 40.

¹²⁸ Eric Michaud, "The Ends of Art according to Beuys," Trans. Rosalind Krauss, *October* 45 (1988): 40.

¹²⁹ Benjamin H. D. Buchloh, Rosalind Krauss, and Annette Michelson, "Joseph Beuys at the Guggenheim," *October* 12 (1980): 17.

¹³⁰ Chris Thomson and Katarina Weslien, "Pure Raw: Performance, Pedagogy and (Re)Presentation," *PAJ: A Journal of Performance and Art* 28, no.1 (2005): 34.

¹³¹ Michaud, 36.

¹³² "Beuys' movements resonated through Abramovic's actions; her alterations to the performance diminishing neither the relationship between person and hare, nor between performer and spectator. The audience was spatially distanced but, unlike in Beuys's performance, visually unobstructed. I felt an almost painful tenderness. There was no irony in this performance, nor did the act of (re)performing overwhelm the action. It, if this may be said of any performance, was utterly sincere." Nikki T Cesare and Jenn Joy. "Performa/(Re)Performa." *The Drama Review* 50, no. 1 (2006): 172.

¹³³ In *Difference and Repetition*, Deleuze develops Marx's idea that "history as theatre, then repetition, along with the tragic and the comic within repetition, forms a condition of movement under which the actors or the heroes produce something effectively new." Deleuze, 15.

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