

Coincidentia oppositorum

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What's weird about your body is that it's got you in it. Actually, you are your body. And you're not, too. As Marcel Proust says, your body is an octopus, an alien, unknown to you, with its own modes and rhythms, its own concerns. At best, it is indifferent to your inhabitation; at worst, it is an agency of destruction, of dissolution and decay. You identify yourself with your body—or with your own image or figure of your body—at your pleasure, but also at your peril. After all, what you call *you* is only another parasite of the body, a dissimulating fragment, a part, an outgrowth, a supplement, a vital lie. Your body does its own thing, but you imagine you can put an end to that through intervention, purification, order, and control. Cosmetics, surgery, exercise: care for the self is an indulgence in a fantasy of the aesthetics—and ascetics—of the body. Could your body have had somebody else in it? Absolutely. In fact, it already does, lots of other bodies. So you're a jealous parasite, too, terrified of and hostile to the other guests and ghosts supported by your bodily host. As the Biblical parable tells it: you are legion, you contain multitudes. And, as the parable also suggests, these intimate multitudes are foreign to you, inhuman objects to be expelled from their co-belonging and mutual possession. If your body is in space, it is not just in a physical space, but linked intimately, constitutionally, to the social and symbolic striations of that space produced by other people, other parasites, other bodies. Is another relation to your body possible? And if so, how can you do it?

Coincidentia oppositorum translates from Latin as 'union of opposites'. Coined by the fifteenth-century German theologian Nicholas of Cusa, the term has mystical meanings. These meanings include, first, the sense that what appears in the world as contradiction is the consequence of our necessarily limited understanding, and, second, that the extremity of mystical experience opens us onto another world which cannot be described in logical terms. Art is like this too, when the experiences it provides or incarnates are so intense and strange that they cannot be satisfactorily described without paradox or falsification. This is powerfully evident in the life and work of Marina [Abramović](#).

From her earliest, absolutely extraordinary performances of the 1970s, which, as classics of the genre, retain their powers of derangement today, through her collaborations with German artist Ulay (Frank Uwe Laysiepen), through the geodes and political pieces of the 1990s, up to the institutional assemblages of the 2000s and beyond, [Abramović](#) has established an experimental practice of performance that is at once revelatory, reeducative, and reconstructive. It is revelatory, because it exposes through intensely personal and risky experiments that which was lodged in the body but nobody knew or wanted to know. It is reeducative, because it offers models, instances, and techniques that go beyond the immediate instance of that body alone, and which can be taken up by others—although not necessarily in a straightforwardly mimetic mode. I certainly don't mean that her work is educational in the sense of providing useful information or book-learning. On the contrary, I mean this in that mystical sense which, in the words of Avital Ronell, involves: 'A teaching without pedagogy ... a practice; a rapport to thoughtfulness, its practice is dedicated to the obliteration of thought'.¹ Yet [Abramović](#)'s work is also reconstructive, because she proffers a way of living that changes itself on the basis of its own discoveries, such that even the singularities of her body's own pre-history can be rearticulated in new ways with other bodies, other organisations, in the service of mystic intensities.

To attempt all this by publicly experimenting upon one's own body, testing its limits and its potentials, has been one of the great projects of performance art. [Abramović](#), along with other seminal performance artists of the 1960s and '70s—the Viennese Actionists, Carolee Schneemann, Valie Export, Gilbert & George, Stelarc, Vito Acconci, Chris Burden, and Mike Parr, among many others—took up the challenge of presenting themselves under conditions of physical and psychic extremity in an effort to unleash something archaic and unprecedented. Take the convent-educated Austrian Valie Export, who changed her surname to that of a cigarette brand. One of her most notorious performances, titled *Action Pants: Genital Panic*, saw her wandering around a Munich cinema in 1969 wearing crotchless pants, her genitals exposed at the eye level of the seated audience. Or take the American Chris Burden who, in addition to having himself shot with a .22 rifle by an assistant and crucified on top of a VW Beetle, once bought advertising space on late-night TV, which he filled with video of

¹ Avital Ronell, *The ÜberReader: Selected Works of Avital Ronell*, edited by Diane Davis, University of Illinois, Urbana and Chicago, 2008, p. 313.

himself crawling naked through broken glass. Or take the Australian Mike Parr who, born with a deformed arm, once hacked off a prosthetic substitute of mincemeat and fake blood before an unsuspecting audience. If performance art is even more diverse and more radical than these instances might suggest, often wittier and more scabrous, what was common to these practitioners was a conviction that the body itself needed to be put on the line, to be presented as such, as the support, the material, the medium, the primal object and subject of art itself, the ultimate background condition of all being, making, doing, and looking. If you think of all the things modern art had already done to its objects—Surrealist cut-ups, altered readymades, or even the slashing and burning of canvases—you can immediately see some of the radical actions that might propose themselves when the body usurps the place of the work.

From the beginning, [Abramović](#) self-professedly confronted the problem of contemporary ritual. Rituals are performances of community under stringent conditions: whether secret women's business or swearing in a US President, it has to be done right. That means: rituals require the right time and place, the right people, the right words in the right order, the right actions. If conditions aren't properly fulfilled, the ritual is perverted and disaster threatens. Rituals are a part of life, yet also marked as apart from life, exceptions to the daily routines of survival. They point to powers which are beyond those of mere survival, such as the continuing impact upon us of the dead, of the spirit world, or of inhuman energies. Inherited, formal, repeated and repetitive, yet playing across lines that demarcate what's secret from what's public, rituals are a part and apart, exception and exemplar, binding and separating at the same time. From [Abramović](#)'s perspective, though the modern world still has rituals in the sense of well-rehearsed social practices, it no longer really has them insofar as they have been emptied of any true connection to their source. We all continue to perform rituals, but don't know or care that we do. Our rituals have lost the intensity that makes ritual *real* ritual. Whether or not this is strictly true is not significant; what is important is [Abramović](#)'s perception of the loss of the import of ritual, because it gave her the impetus to unleash often literally incredible new forms of action. Artists don't have to be clear, correct, or consistent—only creative.

So a fundamental aspect of [Abramović](#)'s work took off from a critique of what ritual seemed to have become in the contemporary world, that is, emptied of any real

significance, part of the vitiation of life and living. Her greatest performances, of which her ‘Rhythms’ series of the 1970s provides some of the most memorable examples, offered a riposte to this vitiation. The performances would be without precedent, therefore unscripted; they would disturb expectations surrounding art and action; they would descend into the inferno without guardrails. They would also have no descendants, producing non-repetitive singularities. They would also inhibit or frustrate any regulated effects or affects. They would also explicitly expose their contravention of convention. Finally, they would be exercises in a kind of depersonalisation.

Precisely because of this concern for revivifying ritual, Abramović’s performances were anti-ritual—but only because she thought that ritual itself had been, well, ritualised by the modern world. She wanted to recapture the essence of ritual, an experience in which the divisions of subject and object, mind and body, performer and audience, might vanish in an impossible, transfiguring fusion—although that’s perhaps putting it too simply or strongly. Such art had to be physical as well as mental, conceptual as much as practical—and the mode of its transmission had also to be part of its work. In risking her own body through these experiments, she came close to incarnating the mad German poet Friedrich Hölderlin’s conviction that ‘at the extreme limit of suffering, nothing more exists than the conditions of time and space’.² Abramović’s performances were anti-rituals in the sense that they didn’t rehearse existing social forms—their intensities aimed at the lost heart of ritual. This is one of the great paradoxes of Abramović’s performance art: the creation of anti-ritual rituals through a mode of *coincidentia oppositorum*.

The audiences of performance art were thereby implicated in a way that ran against established modes of response. Especially in Abramović’s early works, the bodies of audience members were placed under duress, called upon to be shocked, disturbed, to participate in unscripted and even dangerous ways. These days, this aspect has been largely neutered by the institutional art world, not least because Abramović’s assaults were so intense that the risks became too hard for it to bear. The unsettling problems she posed have not been resolved, only circumvented by various means. The role of

² Friedrich Hölderlin, ‘Remarks on *Oedipus*’ in J. M. Bernstein (ed.), *Classic and Romantic German Aesthetics*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 2003, p. 201.

the audience has now been formalised under the heading of ‘participatory art’; that is, by carefully instructing the performance’s auditors as to how they should contribute when the performance that they will be part of takes place. Another associated response ups security measures, which are the correlate of the current formalisation of performance as ‘participation’: guards will be present, insurance-company demands will be met, and the risks will be clearly signposted. While one can understand why such policing has become necessary for public events, and while it’s important not to over-idealise particular moments in performance history, let’s not forget that the current routines reinforce the very strictures [Abramović](#)’s 1970s works were dead against.

Such are the acts of mystic experience, which attempt an annihilation of all acculturation, as they seek to glimpse the face of the absolute. They comprise an archaeology of the body because such extreme acts expose the unmarked social mores they transgress, in line with the principle that you only really know the fullness of a law by breaking it. You weren’t born acting in such a way, you’ve been taught to do so; yet you no longer really notice how you act, for these socially inculcated acts are now so much part of you they’re like the air you breathe; by transgressing them, they’re revealed as a kind of material residue of your own body’s history; in this revelation of provenance, you also neutralise their power. One can see how, in her works of the mid-1970s, [Abramović](#) was targeting and purifying herself of some of the tormenting inheritances of family and nation through her risk-taking, her self-absorption-as-self-exposure, her play with fire and knives, her incision of a five-pointed star around her navel, and so on. Unlike a lot of contemporaneous performance art, however, [Abramović](#)’s was a kind of feminism which didn’t conform either to the macho heroism of many of its male practitioners, nor to the explicit assaults on socially accepted misogyny by many of its female practitioners. Her feminism tangles with what Jacqueline Rose calls ‘the place of unreason’, ‘where the most painful aspects of our inner world do not have to hide from the light, but are ushered forth as handmaidens to our protest’.³ Such protest inevitably confronts all standard modes of personal and social reproduction in the name of such unreason:

³ Jacqueline Rose, *Women in Dark Times*, Bloomsbury, London, 2014, p. 268.

[Abramović](#) is a woman who went from daughterhood to becoming the self-nominated ‘grandmother of performance art’ without passing through motherhood as such.

[Abramović](#)’s early deconstructions of inheritance, in accordance with good esoteric tradition, also prepared her for another, different phase of experimental reeducation: the astonishing sequence of works with her then-partner Ulay, with whom she worked between 1976 and 1988. Each called the other ‘the other’; they sought to suppress their individual egos; they concocted practices that were simultaneously violent and beautiful, inspirational and mortifying. In *Breathing In/Breathing Out*, 1977, they breathed in and out of each other’s mouths until they collapsed from lack of oxygen. In *Point of Contact*, 1980, they stood facing each other, dressed in suits, gazing into each other’s eyes, barely touching except at the tip of an index finger. In the magnificent gesture that is *Rest Energy*, 1980, they were connected by a drawn bow and arrow. [Abramović](#) grips the bow, which faces her; Ulay draws the arrow pointed at her heart. The whole *tableau vivant* crackles with tension and terror. In 1988, they accomplished what must be one of the greatest ever images and acts of a relationship’s break-up. Starting from opposite ends of the Great Wall of China—[Abramović](#) in the East, Ulay in the West—they walked towards each other along the Wall. Upon meeting in the middle, they parted forever. (There is a nice short MoMA video from 2010, however, in which Ulay, seemingly unrehearsed, sits down opposite [Abramović](#) during her performance of the *Artist is Present*; upon opening her eyes and realising who it is, she is visibly moved.)

With Ulay, then, [Abramović](#)’s work moved to a phase of rebuilding on the basis of an absolutely minimal relation, that of *one* to an *other*. This ‘one’ and this ‘other’ together made a Two that was not simply the addition of units, but a kind of twinship-in-becoming—neither one nor two, but something in-between, at once interdimensional and yet foundational, a ‘one–other’. As Charles Green notes: ‘Just as [Abramović](#) /Ulay, through extreme self-absorption, spectralised their bodies, so their collaborative body became their real body, for their corporeal bodies had been

stripped of normal significance'.⁴ This new body, this new real collaborative body, was constructed point-by-point through their series of experiments.

The word *experiment* doesn't designate only a key scientific practice, but personal *experience* as well. Etymologically, the words share the same root. As a passing-through-danger or a coming-out-of-peril, scientific experiments are linked to hypotheses, to propositions which are not really to be confirmed, but rather *not-yet-disconfirmed*. The effects of science upon the status of truth are often misunderstood: scientific truths are not dogma for all time, but uncertain absolutes that have been put on notice. Isn't that also what bodies are for us too—uncertain absolutes permanently on notice? Ditto for our minds, which, as part of our bodies, are necessarily caught up in this unsettlement? Even if a hypothesis is immediately falsified by an experiment's results, in science this is still a gain. Disproof is not simply disappointment, since it adds to our knowledge. In addition to the mystical implications of [Abramović's](#) performances, then, we can discern certain scientific or, rather, para-scientific overtones: to treat her own body as the object of an impersonal experiment in order to expose some uncertain absolutes. Your body is your body, sure, but it's at the same time just some body—and, sorry to say, it could perhaps also be just anybody ... even, at the limits, nobody.

Of course, experiments can always go wrong or fail, be poorly conceived or give inconsistent results. This is certainly something that art regularly takes as a possibility of real interest—and performance art perhaps even more so, since bodies are always literally and directly at stake in the performance. Scientific experiments offer the further paradox of being utterly artificial, controlled spaces, which often isolate a particular trait or its absence to be tested—impossible in the everyday world of complexity and confusion—but this control is calibrated to engage what's unknown in the service of knowledge. Experimental performance art such as [Abramović's](#) is also directed towards a knowledge of the unknown, but one that isn't propositional or mathematical in the same way.

⁴ Charles Green, 'Doppelgangers and the third force: the artistic collaborations of Gilbert & George and Marina Abramović/Ulay', *Art Journal*, vol. 59, no. 2, 2000, p. 42.

This is where [Abramović](#)'s anti-ritual rituals confront the stabilising repetitions of the standard sciences. Scientific experiments have to be repeated or at least repeatable-in-principle, while a performance is always singular. This doesn't mean that performances can't be repeated. On the contrary: sometimes they even take repetition itself as their material. In 2005, [Abramović](#) famously reperformed selected classics of performance art as *Seven Easy Pieces* at the Guggenheim, in which, in addition to reprising works by Bruce Nauman, Vito Acconci, Valie Export, Joseph Beuys, and Gina Pane, she revived one of her own: the savage self-flagellations of *Lips of Thomas* (originally 1975). Unlike scientific experiments, such repetitions of performance art are not there to create and clarify propositional stabilities, but to unleash experiential differences. This is where the experiments of science and those of art really part company: the former seek to establish a law that holds across the different iterations, the latter to create a difference from the iterations of the same.

In the wake of the break-up with Ulay, [Abramović](#)'s work of the 1990s took another turn. It no longer focused upon physico-symbolic residues to be purified in extreme events of depersonalisation, it no longer sought only the maximal transformation and reconstruction of life through the most minimal of relations (the 'one-other' of the work with Ulay), but essayed to reconnect with vast historical and geological powers in a kind of exchange of energies between the subterranean and the cosmic. Her 'Dragon' performance-sculptures, in which the human body becomes a kind of aesthetic battery which plugs itself into mineral and reptilian circuitry, date from this period, in which we also find wounded geodes, beds for dead spirits, and crystal brushes. These mineralogical connections were accompanied by personal-political takes on the conflict in the former Yugoslavia, such as in the horrifying performance that is *Balkan Baroque*, 1997, in which the artist sat in the performance space for six days, washing 1,500 fresh beef bones while singing songs from her childhood. In an interview with Janet Kaplan, [Abramović](#) says, 'I come from the Balkans. The Balkans is literally a bridge between East and West'.⁵ If this remark specifies something about her geographical, familial, and cultural provenance, [Abramović](#) often mobilises comparable images and acts of bridging, forging relations between otherwise disconnected zones. That she effectively treats her body as a bridge between the

⁵ Janet A. Kaplan, 'Deeper and deeper: interview with Marina Abramović', *Art Journal*, vol. 58, no. 2, 1999, p. 19.

everyday and the spiritual is also a part of her serpentine process of reconnection. As ever with [Abramović](#), such bridging does not neutralise differences, but involves the mystic work of unifying opposites.

The work that is *Private Archaeology*, 1997–2015, can serve as an example of this process. I have already mentioned the abstract archaeological qualities that were part of [Abramović](#)'s performances from the start. Early on, the archaeology was of social routines that had been lodged in her body, which she excavated by breaking them. In this work, however, the archaeology initially presents as more familiar: the drawers of a wooden cabinet are filled with a variety of artefacts, objects, images, and notes. Some of these are souvenirs of a personal kind; others speak rather to [Abramović](#)'s interests in other cultures. The visitor climbs a short flight of three wooden steps to access the drawers, whereupon he or she can examine their contents at leisure. Scrambling the differences between private and public, personal and the historical, animate and inanimate, past and present, *Private Archaeology* extends [Abramović](#)'s researches by offering a *Wunderkammer* of suggestive correspondences.

As an established 'grandmother' artist, [Abramović](#) can now give 'advice to the young' and tell us 'how to drink a glass of water'. Her recent works place the emphasis on consciousness, even mindfulness, rather than on violent depersonalisations. Yet, as Philip Auslander noted of Vito Acconci, such instructions make you hyperaware of an autonomic function, by inducing you to attend to the most basic, homeostatic functions of your physiology. In doing so, you're quietly placed in a strange situation, insofar as your mind starts to recognise the bodily conditions upon which it is entirely dependent; this dependency alerts you to your helplessness vis-à-vis your own body. You are not in control of the most fundamental elements of your life. Rather than having to perform obviously risky public acts to achieve mystical depersonalisation, certain internal modes of self-attention can also do the job.

This revelatory authoritarianism is something that performance art has taken up more and more in the last decades, where the anti-ritual rituals of the 1970s return in a literally more orthodox guise: that of organised official religion with its saints and its icons, its power showing itself in and as glory. Eastern Christianity—and let's not forget that [Abramović](#)'s great-uncle was Patriarch of the Serbian Orthodox Church—

holds that to give icons honour is also to directly transmit such honour to the Prototype, to the divine beyond. In addition to her longstanding interest in Indigenous Australian ceremony, Tibetan Buddhism, and Brazilian shamanism, much of [Abramović](#)'s recent work returns to the great mystics, past and present, notably the figure of Saint Teresa of Ávila. In the sequence titled *The Kitchen*, 2009, [Abramović](#) levitates in the kitchen of a Spanish Carthusian convent; in collaboration with chef Dominique Ansel, she created a gold- and chilli-dust pastry with a lychee centre, a new kind of host for a new kind of Eucharist. Saint Teresa herself spoke of the spiritual seeker as 'in agony ... rejoicing with ineffable joy' and of the self as 'a castle made of a single diamond'.⁶ The self is a hidden crystal through which agony refracts as joy: the secret place where opposites meet.

[Abramović](#) began her work in the form of the great aggressive depersonalisations of the 1970s, in which she actively staged experiments in radical passivity; with Ulay, she continued the work of depersonalisation, but now in a constructive mode, rebuilding upon a minimal form of relation; in the 1990s, she turned to a solitary re-binding of geological, historical, animalistic, and personal elements, whereby present events were to be integrated with the immemorial past of biophysical constituents; from the 2000s, this work of reintegration infiltrated art museums and established other associated institutions of memorialisation, in which the disruptive mystic exercises of the 1970s were reconciled with ancient traditions of esoteric public glory. In her works of the past decade or so, [Abramović](#) integrates the audience into new ritual forms. In doing so, she shows how performance art can conjoin experiment, didactics, therapeutics, and dramatics in a unique fashion. Through every stage of her work, the relation between her body, its limits and its powers is put into question according to procedures that always—despite their variations—try to expose and activate a mystic kernel of the self. The very tension between the experimental depersonalisations of her early works and the museal auto-embalming glorifications of the present is part of this work of *coincidentia oppositorum*, a paradoxical proof of life-as-art.

⁶ St. Teresa of Avila, *Interior Castle*, ed. and trans. E. Allison Peers, Dover, New York, NY, 2007, p. 15.