

***Seven Easy Pieces* and Performance Document(ation)s**

By **Benjamin D. Powell**

*After thirty years of performing, I feel like it is my duty to
retell the story of
performance art in a way that respects the past and also
leaves room for reinterpretation.*
--Marina Abramović¹

*The keyboard style became more my style, because I started
playing my samples like melodies. That really wasn't being
done by people back then. They would just push the key, drop
the sample, and that's it. They wouldn't usually actually play
the sample. But back then, I would start sampling one note
and playing it on different notes of the keyboard. I started
chopping things down to notes and chords, not knowing which
chords they were but knowing them as sounds.*
--RZA²

*Day 1—Wednesday
(First hour sucks—nothing).³*

In the fall of 2005, internationally acclaimed performance artist Marina Abramović presented a series of seven performance art pieces entitled *Seven Easy Pieces* at the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum in New York City. Over the course of one week she performed five works first performed by other performance artists from the 1960s and 1970s and added two of her own. She selected five performances of her performance art colleagues from the 60s and 70s that were considered “important” or resonated with her in some manner, and re-performed the pieces in front of a contemporary audience adding both a re-performance and original of her own work to round out the seven performances. Abramović had not been present to witness any of the original five performances that she “covered.” Similarly, I was not present to witness any of the perform-

ances of *Seven Easy Pieces*. However, like Abramović, I choose to engage *Seven Easy Pieces* by examining her performances of/from the past in my own performance of/in the present.

A host of questions and complications invariably arise for both me and Abramović through our shared interest of experimenting with different forms of retelling and re-presenting performances of/from the past. What are the differences between the performances that she covers and her subsequent interpretations of them as “new” performance art pieces? What type of knowledge is gained from a historical perspective by repeating or re-presenting performances which she did not author? How do her performances of a specific period in the history of performance art allow us to rethink that period and our own? How is ownership imagined in relation to performance and history? How does difference function in forming a different way to understand a performance in the present and in the past? And finally, how can we experiment with the relationships between technique, documentation, critique, and praxis in order to create compelling and productive conversations about performance and performance art? These questions guide the trajectory of this essay as I examine *Seven Easy Pieces*. This essay interrogates Abramović’s re-performances as a complex performance process, while simultaneously using aesthetic and material elements from her re-performances and their documentations as variables in my own re-performance on the page. Consequently, this essay provides access points for an understanding of performance creation and critique to develop outside of static notions of representation, reproduction, and repetition, and enacts a different form of performance document that produces, rather than disappears.⁴

Remembering Performance

Paul Ricouer writes in *Memory, History, Forgetting* that if “historiography is first of all archived memory and if all the subsequent cognitive operations taken up by the epistemology of historical knowledge proceed from this initial gesture of archiving, the historian’s mutation of space and time can be taken as the formal condition of possibility for this gesture of archiving.”⁵ Every act of writing about performance is an act of memory and of experimenting with different forms of narrating the experience of remembering. Ricouer makes it clear that the power of the historian to mutate space and time is precisely the power of memory and history themselves. When we write or talk about performance, we are remembering something we have seen and then attempt to organize our thoughts in a wish to paint a clear picture of what we remember and what we think or feel about it. In this way, when we critique a performance we are essentially taking some past event and reorganizing the event in the

present in order to communicate our criticism of the event to a reader. A whole host of methods used to document performance have emerged over the last hundred years or so, from verbatim transcription to performative writing. Ricouer's ideas about archived memory and history allude to a few major obstacles when writing about performance. Namely, what happens to the performance we are critiquing when it is treated as an event seemingly closed off from the multiplicity of relations that conditioned its very emergence as a performance event? Put another way: what does performance become when we impart an essence or essential characteristic to performance's ontology?

Peggy Phelan argues the value of performance's disappearance once performed. For Phelan, disappearance is the main lens through which to analyze the nature of performance acts. Famously, Phillip Auslander went to equally great lengths to counter-argue the essential nature of performance in terms of liveness, and how different forms of mediatization alter and affect live performance and our understanding of presence.⁶ Rather than call these components the essential qualities of performance I consider them as singular and material sites of a performance process. The process I envision does not culminate with the completion of any given performance act or "simple" documentation(s) of performance through photographs or other archival techniques. In her essay "The Aesthetic of the Unfinished: Ethics and Performance," Mindy Fenske offers the idea of the "unfinished" as a critical lens for writing about the relationship between performance form and content that moves past dialectical *arguments*, like Phelan and Auslander's, into more dialogic modes of *conversation*. Fenske argues that in an unfinished aesthetic

structures be revealed, rather than hidden. The form of the performance has to reveal the stakes of its construction and not hide the process in the product. The aesthetic product, moreover, must construct an invitation to response that does not predetermine appropriate interpretation, but opens up a dialogic space of engagement. It must be, and desire to be, unfinished: Unfinished in that it suggests that meaning has yet to be determined, that form is an act of construction with specific risks and obligations, and that the conversation within form/representation is ongoing.⁷

By opening up a performance to different elements of its construction—marking the ideas, inspirations, directions, questions, patterns, or ideas drawn upon during the performance's creation manifest in the performance itself—Fenske creates a space for the process of performance to continue in/as a continuing or *unfinishing* dialogue. In so marking the elements of a text's construction the author creates what Roland Barthes calls a

writerly text.⁸ In staging and documenting *Seven Easy Pieces* I argue that Abramović opens her performances up to/in a process that critics can participate in as co-producers of meaning in writerly modes. By using the form(s) provided by Abramović through her formulation, staging, and subsequent documentation of *Seven Easy Pieces* I argue that an analysis of her performances also opens up onto the unfinished realm of intertexts, play, memory, and iteration.

The five performance pieces that Abramović chose to re-perform were pieces created by a specific group of artists all living in varying historical contexts and time periods, all creating performances out of very real material circumstances specific to their own histories. Johanna Burton notes that Abramović's interest in "exhuming [the] dematerialized material was geared toward a literal, physical, reinvestment in it—one aimed at problematizing the question of just when a piece of live art begins and ends, to say nothing of how to keep such 'liveness' alive."⁹ According to Burton, the specter(s) of previous performers and their work loomed over each one of Abramović's performances, watching on high in the spiraling tiers of the museum.¹⁰ The fact that the performances Abramović chose to re-perform had actually happened some time ago in the past, raises serious questions about the nature of performance as an event, and representation as potentiality rather than essence.

In the program for *Seven Easy Pieces*, a generalized description of each of the seven performances is outlined:

. . . [W]ith *Seven Easy Pieces* Abramović reenacts seminal performance works by her peers dating from the 1960's and '70's, interpreting them as one would a musical score and documenting their realization. The project is premised on the fact that little documentation exists for most performances from this critical early period; one often has to rely upon testimonies from witnesses or photographs that show only portions of any given piece. *Seven Easy Pieces* examines the possibility of redoing and preserving an art form that is, by nature, ephemeral.¹¹

Abramović's performances are framed by the use of words like "musical score," "documentation," "witnesses," "redoing," and "ephemeral." I'm uncomfortable looking at performance simply as an object whose identity ensures its disappearance. Similarly, the question of how best to document a performance that disappears (performative writing, digital video and sound, photographs, etc.) is a question I feel is often given up on because of the perceived impossibility to document the REALITY of the performance object. Obviously the method of documentation would fail at capturing the essence of the performance using the ephemeral model because in such we

assume that performance begins and ends with the event of performing in front of an audience. I argue there are more productive means of doing and writing about performance which while openly admitting a performance event that ends, considers performance as a process untethered to a strict logic of representation and identity.¹² In this way, the act of documentation and criticism shifts to engaging various modes of representation through repetition and difference, rather than looking at different performances as representative of the success or failure of living up to an essential idea of performance. While words like “documentation” and “ephemerality” need to be utilized and examined in discussions about performance, how we use words, how we perform, how we do things—how we operationalize our terms—and the consequences of choosing particular meanings for them is an important project that cannot be forgotten or ignored

(RE)PERFORMANCES

1st Night:

Bruce Nauman

Body Pressure

Yellow Body, Galerie Konrad Fischer, Düsseldorf

February 4-March 6, 1974.¹³

In their article “Performa/(Re)Performa,” T. Nikki Cesare and Jenn Joy observe that *Seven Easy Pieces* was “about remembering, though the question this time might be ‘Marina, *how* do we remember?’”¹⁴ Indeed, all of the performances comprising *Seven Easy Pieces* seem to be Abramović’s take on answering the question of how one remembers. The answer gets increasingly complicated because of the introduction of Abramović’s body as a metonym for the performances that she re-performed, standing as a material marker of the interpretive act. How she remembers the performances covered in each segment of *Seven Easy Pieces* became marked by how she chose to stage each one. Cesare and Joy call this phenomenon “embodied documentation (a re-remembering, if you will).”¹⁵ By reattaching a body to the memory of a past performance, Abramović forces the audience to simultaneously engage the past and present, subsequently increasing our awareness of the impact of memory upon the future.

Ricouer writes that remembering is “not only welcoming, receiving an image of the past, it is also searching for it, ‘doing something.’ The verb ‘to remember’ stands in for the substantive ‘memory.’ What the verb designates is the fact that memory is ‘exercised.’”¹⁶ If, as Ricouer argues, memory denotes active participation, the act of remembering is characterized by a method of experimentation enacted by she who

remembers. There is, of course, a limit of the past that we cannot cross or apprehend with our senses. One cannot see into the past any more than one can see into someone else's mind. However, one can always press themselves up against the limit of the past in order to see what kind of particles, scents, sounds, and dust gets left behind on their bodies.

Abramović's first re-performance was of Bruce Nauman's *Body Pressure*. Originally in Nauman's piece a set of instructions were posted in the performance space for the audience to follow. The text on the wall "was an action to be performed by the audience," and read as follows:

Body Pressure

Press as much of the front surface of your body (palms in or out, left of right cheek) against the wall as possible. Press very hard and concentrate. Form an image of yourself (suppose you had just stepped forward) on the opposite side of the wall pressing back against the wall very hard. Press very hard and concentrate on the image pressing very hard. (the image of pressing very hard) Press your front surface and back surface toward each other and begin ignore or Block the thickness of the wall. (remove the wall) Think how various parts of your body press against the wall; which parts touch and which do not. Consider the parts of your back which press against the wall; press hard and feel how the front and back of your body press together. Concentrate on the tension in the muscles, pain where bones meet, fleshy deformations that occur under pressure; consider body hair, perspiration, odors (smells). This may become a very erotic exercise.¹⁷

These instructions were printed on pieces of paper and left in a stack in the middle of the performance hall. The audience could take a piece of paper and participate based on their interpretation of the instructions. According to Burton, there was no set duration for the action(s) and moreover no guarantee that anyone had ever performed them in the first place.¹⁸ Abramović describes her fascination with the possibility

of participation moving and transforming through space and time in an interview, stating that Nauman

made the score or instructions available to the audience members to perform the piece themselves. This gave permission to the public to re-perform the work or not. Mostly they don't because you can just put the piece of paper on the table at home or frame it on the wall. For me I was really free to make the piece, and without contradicting it in any way the concept because clear instructions were there.¹⁹

The poetic nature of Nauman's instructions allowed the audience to interpret how to perform the piece in an equally poetic fashion—extending the performance through prolonged pauses between words, moving back into their homes, or giving over fully to the words as they wash over their actions and understanding. That Abramović felt free to re-perform Bauman's piece based on the clear set of instructions, should also be considered in light of the fact that one could take the piece back to their bedroom and create a whole new performance from its “original” context.

00:54:22:00

Man: [. . .] I don't know, in one sense . . . repeating a performance will be kind of, you know, being unfaithful to the original aim of the whole act as a unique . . . but nevertheless it's going to be great and I'm going to enjoy it. Thanks.²⁰

RE:PERFORMANCES

2nd Night

Vito Acconci

Seedbed

Sonnabend Gallery, New York

January 15-29, 1972

Original duration: 2 times a week, six hours each day.²¹

Famously, *Seedbed* was performed by Vito Acconci underneath a large platform in Sonnabend gallery over the course of two weeks. During the performance he masturbated under the platform and remained unseen by the spectators walking above him. He amplified his voice and body so that the noises he produced while masturbating were piped through the gallery space by means of an amplifier. The audience could only hear

the sounds he produced while he similarly could only hear the reactions and/or movements of the audience above. Imagination became key for both the audience and Acconci during this performance. The instructions made available seem to reinforce the importance of imagination for both artist and audience:

Room A: Activated on Wednesday and Saturday.

The room is activated by my presence underground, underfoot—by my movement from point to point under the ramp. The goal of my activity is the production of seed—the scattering of seed throughout the underground area. (My aim is to concentrate on my goal, to be totally enclosed within my goal.)

The means to this goal is private sexual activity. (My attempt is to maintain the activity throughout the day, so that maximum seed is produced; my aim is to have constant contact with my body so that an effect from my body is carried outside.)

My aids are the visitors in the gallery—in my seclusion, I can have private images of them, talk to myself about them: my fantasies about them can excite me, enthuse me to sustain—to resume—my private sexual activity. The seed “planted” on the floor, then, is a joint result of my performance and theirs.²²

Great faith, or an active imagination, allows belief that what one hears, but cannot see, actually takes place. I imagine it’s the same way with distant memories or long-forgotten daydreams. “Did those things that I think I thought I heard or saw, really happen?” A different type of reporting is required for the things we lost in the fire of the past and memory; a type of reporting is needed that allows the status of the past and of memory to remain necessarily different than the present.

*One by one. All together we can have that kind of imagination.*²³

Day 2--Thursday

00:09:03:02

*Woman: You know, it’s brilliant and then you kinda gotta get your head around the fact that she’s actually down there doing it. I’m you know, your whole mind kinda goes “What? What’s going on here?”*²⁴

In the section of the book *Seven Easy Pieces* documenting Abramović’s re-performance of *Seedbed*, pages and pages of recorded text spoken by Abramović detail the fantasies and imagery she used so that the “maximum seed is produced” exist. The passages are quite graphic at times, reflecting

a certain link between fantasy and reality. However, at other times, Abramović clearly moves through the sexually explicit into a reflexive understanding of the seed producing process:

I need a rest. Just a little bit of rest. I'm so released and so quiet. So good here. There is water. Many water. I think I have to pee again. Now such body functions. It's very strange. Everytime I come I have to pee. Otherwise I don't. yesterday I didn't pee at all. But today is so different. Is that what I produce? I'm trying. I can't. I'm trying. I'm trying. Can't. I'm going to pee. I just had an orgasm.²⁵

In addition to her attention to the production of the body, she continually reminds the audience of the production of the performance. At least five or six times she stops the erotic narrative to remind the audience exactly what she is producing: "One more. I will start all over again. I'm doing Vitto Acconci piece, the *Seedbed*, what he made in Sonnabend Gallery in '73, masturbating under the floor of the gallery, producing the sperm means producing the seed. I'm redoing this piece. The big question is what I am producing."²⁶ She raises an interesting point: what exactly is she producing by re-performing Acconci's piece? I argue that the "seed" she is producing is in actuality a space of tension and potential to rethink the place of documentation and citation in conjunction with live performance.

Philip Auslander writes in "The Performativity of Performance Documentation" that two major categories for the relationship between documentation and performance are the documentary and the theatrical. According to Auslander, the documentary form is the more traditional means of documenting performance in which the documentation provides both a record of the performance actually happening and a means by which the performance could possibly be restaged. The theatrical form of documenting performance suggests that the document itself is the only place where the performance happens.²⁷ Auslander clearly prefers the theatrical form of documentation that treats such a document as a performative in Austin's sense—that the act of documenting an event as a performance is what constitutes it as such. He goes further in suggesting that in the theatrical form of performance documentation the intended audience for the performance shifts from those that were present during the original, to those witnessing the performing document. Abramović certainly plays with the notion of an intended audience throughout her performances not only by "covering" performances that had their own audience and event, but also by going to great lengths to document her re-performances that ultimately take the form of book *Seven Easy Pieces*. By doing so, Abramović creates a place of performative documentary

between the binary Auslander lays out. Subsequently neither the original performance event nor the performing/performed document settle into easy ontological distinctions. Neither contain the essence of the other or stand alone as a thing that can be easily identified as PERFORMANCE.

I do not agree with Auslander that in the case of *Seven Easy Pieces* Abramović uses only eyewitness accounts to ascertain the characteristics of the performance and not the audience's contribution.²⁸ Theresa Smalec argues that

even as her aim to 're-perform the score' hinges on the copy, and not on any ontological privileging of the live, she ultimately unsettles Auslander's conclusion . . . [A]bramović dislodges the issues of presence, power, and authenticity from the static archive, and relocates them to the volatile site of her [performing] female body.²⁹

Abramović's *Seedbed* creates a space between the past and present, performed and documented, fantasy and reality. Abramović's spoken fantasies of the unseen spectators above the platform, combined with audience reaction(s) to the piece produce a performance event that necessarily extends beyond the ontological distinction of either "live" and/or "documented."

00:34:30:00

Barba: Babette is making this movie and there's other video and movie and still photography, ahh, since I was very close to that sort of situation, uhm, it was quite a dramatic change which came about in the late seventies and suddenly performers were suddenly conscious of recording and documenting.

Man: What we're supposed to be seeing are essentially ephemeral events would that be true?

Barba: Not just ephemeral, but somewhat more ah, unregulated events, let's put it that way. A certain amount of spontaneity I think is inevitably lost, uhm, the putting of all the performances on a stage which is removing it from the audience is another thing.³⁰

3rd Night:

Valie Export

Action Pants: Genital Panic

Augusta-Lichtspiele, Munich

April 22nd, 1969

Original Duration: approximately 10 minutes.³¹

In her introduction to the book *Art and Feminism*, Peggy Phelan states that “writing about art has traditionally been concerned with that which is interior to the frame, whereas feminism has focused primarily on what lies outside the frame of patriarchal logic, representation, history, and justice—which is to say the lives of most women.”³² Interestingly enough when considering issues surrounding Abramović’s re-performance of *Action Pants*, there is not much left materially with regards to Valie Export’s original performance besides photos in frames. In fact Export’s initial performance of *Action Pants* calls into question the tension between what takes place “inside” the frame and what takes place “outside” of it. Not too coincidentally all that “remains” of Abramović’s re-performance of *Action Pants* is a series of photographs and fragments of conversations.

In the photo Valie Export sits on a chair with her legs spread wide. Her pants have a giant hole in the crotch, exposing her genitals. She is dressed in black jeans and a black leather jacket of some sort. Her hair is wild like a lion’s mane and she holds a machine gun. Clad in black high-heels, she rests one of her feet on another wooden chair to her left. The floor is dirty and the film is grainy. The picture is captioned: *Action Pants: Genital Panic*. However, it is not a picture of the performance *Action Pants*; the picture represents something that happened beyond and outside the frame of the photo. In a 2005 interview Export described the scene:

The performance took place in an art cinema in Munich, where I was invited with other filmmakers to show my films. I was dressed in a sweater and pants with the crotch completely cut away. I told the audience, ‘What you see now is reality; and it is not on the screen, and everybody sees you watching this now.’ I moved slowly up the aisle, walking towards the people; they had my exposed crotch in front of their faces. I had no idea what the audience would do. As I moved from row to row, people silently got up and left the theatre. Taken out of the film context, this was a totally different way for them to connect with a particular erotic symbol.³³

No pictures of the actual doing of the performance in the theatre exist, only recreated pictures of Export in the outfit she wore, posing in a particular way so as to evoke a connection between the event in the theatre and the photographic document. A disconnect between the body moving from row to row in the theatre and the body in the picture is created. This tension between represented bodies finds an analogue in the disconnect between the body in Export’s film and her roaming body inside the theatre. In her documentation of the performance of *Action Pants*, Export utilizes

the same formalistic characteristics of the performance itself to evoke similar questions albeit in a different manner. In doing so, Export extends the performance event of *Action Pants* beyond the performance itself; that which lies outside the frame of the photographic document is precisely what the inside of the frame both fails to capture, and necessarily needs to continue performing alongside.

For Abramović's re-performance of *Action Pants*, she used the photograph as the starting point for her performance rather than the actual event that took place in the theatre in Munich. In the photographs of her performance, Abramović dresses in a black leather jacket and carries a M16 machine gun. She wears full makeup and dons black pants with the crotch cut out. Her genitals are also exposed. She sits and stands among two wooden chairs placed on a small white circular stage staring out at the audience. Unlike Export's photo, Abramović's gaze does not settle on one particular vantage point; she is photographed looking in many directions that rest outside the frame. The intense gaze of Abramović throughout the photographs I have of the performance calls to mind a certain longing for contact in an unseen space. The people with whom she makes eye contact are often left out of the picture, yet are somehow a wholly necessary element of the both the performance and its document. The *photographs* of the performance combine with her *live* performance to create an open space of play that redefines the idea of "original" and "copy." Johanna Burton describes the re-performances as having "cemented themselves in [her] mind as sophisticated holograms, both present and past, fact and fiction."³⁴ The document of Export's *Action Pants* then defies Phelan's proclamation of the otherness of performance documents by becoming an integral part of the re-performance of Abramović. According to Burton, Abramović answered the question of whether performance can be live again by actually rendering it live again. The documentary sources served as material for the creation of "new" performances all the while retaining knowledge of the stagedness of the new performances as/in resemblance to the old.³⁵ Abramović's performances were repeated, but different. The performances were copies of copies, but based on the ways that Abramović experimented with the construction of each they became reborn in their oddly familiar difference.

In the same way that Export was keenly aware of the power of the documentary photograph of *Action Pants* to both represent the past performance and evoke the process through which the past performance was constructed, Abramović's strategic implementation of documentation during each of her performances in *Seven Easy Pieces* creates a new space to understand both the re-performances and their documents as reciprocal extensions of process, rather than static representations containing discrete essences. Burton asserts that the "filming of *Pieces* was itself

a performance, with Babette Mangolte deftly choreographing a fleet of cameras and a crew.³⁶ She goes on to question both the performance and Phelan's assertion that performance cannot be documented or otherwise participate in the circulation of representations without becoming something other than performance. Burton reads *Seven Easy Pieces* as a series of performances based on representations of performances and images that have already disappeared, but not so much that they are non-existent.³⁷ Clearly, Burton considers the idea of disappearance in a different manner than Phelan. The photograph of Export sitting in the chair lives on in Abramović's re-performance of *Action Pants* and focuses on the power of performance to continually repeat and differ as a process of performance rather than its end. A new space is opened up that relaunches the performance of archive, memory, and history as potentiality and living, rather than essentialized and disappearing. Abramović takes the original version of Export's performance and uses the context of the performance as generative material for her restaging of it. This sampling of an "original source" on the part of Abramović relaunches both performances into a future place of continued critique and construction simply and effectively. The question then becomes "What new things can we learn from these performances taken together?" rather than "How did one performance fail its attempt to repeat the other?"

Time Unknown:

Younger Woman: Wow.

Older Woman: The stuff that she was doing. . .

Younger Woman: So she didn't do it verbatim?

Older Woman: She did it verbatim and then, what she did, she expanded the, she'd take parts and expand them . . .³⁸

RE:PERFORMANCES

4th Night:

Gina Pane

The Conditioning, first action of Self-portrait(s)

1973

Original duration: 30 minutes.³⁹

"In the moment when we realize that the spirit is in the material . . . the material becomes spirit—Gina Pane"⁴⁰

To endure means to hold out against or sustain without yielding. It

also means to continue to exist or last. Endurance is the ability or strength to continue to endure through the lasting quality or duration. For her fourth re-performance Abramović engaged endurance and endurance performance head on. In 1973 Gina Pane staged a performance where she laid on a metal cot of sorts, inches above a set of burning candles, for thirty minutes. Throughout her career, Pane, along with other artists such as Abramović, Chris Burden, and Valie Export, engaged in “acts of extraordinary endurance, insisting that their unnerving and frequently dangerous undertakings were learning experiences of a deeply cathartic nature. For them, pain and fear could be understood as the material of the work.”⁴¹ However, Pane did not consider herself a performance artist. Rather she viewed her work as a series of actions replete with extreme symbolic content, but not theatricality.⁴² Pane’s work, sometimes described as “ordeal art,” often gets mentioned in the same breath as Abramović. Phelan quotes Pane commenting on her own art: “We live in continuous danger, always. So [my body-art investigates] a radical moment, the moment most loaded with tension and the least distant from one body to the other, the [moment] of the wound.”⁴³

Abramović’s connection to Pane and the similarities in thematic content of their performances is important to note to better understand the historical contexts from which the two artists arose, however Abramović’s re-performance of *The Conditioning* is a re-performance of someone else’s pain. For her performance Abramović performed atop her metal cot for seven hours, not thirty minutes. She continually got off the cot to relight candles or replace ones that had burned down to their wicks. In examining photographs of both Pane and Abramović, the first thing I notice is that Abramović’s hair is so much longer than Pane’s. It dangles so close to the open flames of the candles. In each set of photographs, the candles evoke some sense of a ceremony in which I am not a participant, only an onlooker. Interestingly enough, for a performance centered on the prolonged endurance of pain, I feel no heat from any of the candles. I only recognize that they are actually on fire through various gestures of discomfort or indicators of pain on the part of Abramović. A curled fist. A small wince of the mouth. A look of desperate exhaustion. Yet I feel no heat from the flames, no sense of time elapsing at its tired pace. I do not feel Abramović’s pain—I do not think I am supposed to—or really want to for that matter.

The corporeal disconnect between the bodies of the audience and the artists, is an interesting problem in both Abramović’s re-performance and Pane’s initial action piece. What is the limit of these performances? Is there a limit between what the bodies of the audience experience and what the bodies of the performers perform? Is there a limit between the two performances themselves? How can the concept of limit be recouped so that

access beyond limits can be gained and the limits themselves understood as productive rather than limiting? When confronted with pictures of both Abramović's and/or Pane's performances, I almost always find myself questioning exactly how something feels or wondering the reasoning behind a particular series of actions. As soon as these types of questions come into my mind however, I acknowledge that I can never know exactly what the "herring feels."⁴⁴ Instead, I encounter a new series of questions not based on what the performance means, but on what the performance is doing. What is Pane showing us about performance through the very means of its showing? How does Abramović's experimentation illuminate both process and performance? What are the formal elements utilized in the construction of each performance and how can we adapt/adopt those elements in our critique of the performance?

Day Four—Saturday
00:14:23

Woman: No, but I think if we, if we could feel the heat, we'd have a different connection to it.

Man 1: Yeah, that is true.

Woman: I mean, the very slightest bit of heat being felt . . . I mean I definitely respond to the wind, I mean like every time the door opens, it's blowing the candles, and that, that's interesting to me. That reminds me that there are candles underneath her body and that might be relief for her, when it sort of blows in another direction or shifts. So that's the only way I can experience the heat, from the air.⁴⁵

5th Night:

Joseph Beuys

How to Explain Pictures to a Dead Hare

Galerie Schmela, Düsseldorf

November 26-December 31, 1965 (performance on opening night)

Original duration: 3 hours.⁴⁶

Joseph Beuys' performance of *How to Explain Pictures to a Dead Hare* took place in a museum as the performance dealt with issues of spectatorship and interpretation of art objects. Beuys, face covered with gold leaf, sat with a dead hare cradled in his arms, whispering, slowly and deliberately explaining the inspiration and meaning of his various artworks hanging up around them.⁴⁷ Forty years later, Marina Abramović re-performed *Dead Hare* inside another museum. Another artist, performing

another version of the piece, inside another version of the museum. What changed since Beuys first performed the piece in 1965? Does Abramović's re-performance in a similar but ultimately different context alter our understanding of the performance of both? How do these two performances situate Abramović's performances in *Seven Easy Pieces*, all of which take place inside the museum? What is the nature of art and/or performance that stresses a pressing need to rethink interpretation and meaning-making for both the artist and viewer in a new/old space?

Beuys described his performance of *Dead Hare* as a "complex tableau about the problem of language, and about the problems of thought, of human consciousness, and of the consciousness of animals."⁴⁸ Did Beuys consider the hare as animal, or did the hare stand as a metaphor for Beuys' view of the human audience inside the museum watching the performance? Valerie Casey quotes Beuys saying that "a hare comprehends more than many human beings with their stubborn rationalism . . . I told him that he needed only to scan the picture to understand what is really important about it."⁴⁹ The he referred to in the above quote is the dead hare, and the picture is the collection of photographs hanging around the space where he performed. The explanation of each one of the pictures to the hare was unheard by the audience because Beuys only whispered into its ears. He described the only other sound breaking the muted silence of the room as a giant metal shoe that he wore on one foot, clanking across the hard stone floor.⁵⁰

The irony of the struggle of the audience to simply hear Beuys during the performance, while simultaneously trying to make sense of the performance as a whole, highlights the tension between sensing something and locating meaning in the senses. To expect that one should be able to hear what a performer is saying during a performance is rational. To try and make meaning out of what one sees while walking through a museum is rational. To make the connection between the sensation of heat from the flame of a candle and the nature of the flame itself is also rational. However, Beuys was not interested in rational thought processes as the sole indicator of meaning in a creative work of art. In the program to her re-performance of Beuys' piece, Abramović included an excerpt from an interview with Beuys which states his interest in a different type of meaning making with regard to the creative act:

The problem lies in the word "understanding" and its many levels which cannot be restricted to rational analysis. Imagination, inspiration, a longing all lead people to sense that these other levels also play a part in understanding. This must be the root of reactions to this action, and is why my technique has been to try and seek out the energy points in the human power field, rather than demanding

specific knowledge or reactions on the part of the public. I try to bring a light to the complexity of creative areas.⁵¹

Beuys' inaudible whispers to the dead hare forced the audience to reorient themselves to how they were making meaning out of something that resided outside of rational sense-making. "I cannot hear what he is saying, therefore I do not understand what he is doing," becomes "I cannot hear what he is saying. What are other ways, imaginative or creative, for me to make sense of the fact that I cannot hear what he is saying during a *part* of the performance *and* the performance as a *whole*?" I am not saying that there were not people already "thinking outside the box" as Beuys advocates, but that Beuys explicitly constructed a performance about "thinking outside the box," simultaneously forcing the audience to "think outside the box" about a performance about "thinking outside the box." The processes at work in Beuys performance were both conditioned by the performance *and* the very conditions for the performance to emerge.

The type of meaning-making that Beuys advocates through his performance of *Dead Hare* reflects issues at work within Abramović's re-performances. Her choice to stage her performances in the Guggenheim museum conjures interesting questions about the nature of viewing "art" versus viewing "performance art." The museum naturally raises images of framed paintings or photographs hanging on the walls, sculpture(s) strategically placed throughout space, and solemn viewers walking from piece to piece, soaking it all in. In the case of *Dead Hare*, Beuys implicated the role of the museum and its patrons in engaging creative works. In *Seven Easy Pieces*, Abramović implicates the museum and viewer in similar ways, yet still decides to re-perform iconic works in an iconic setting. What issues centered on the performances and the museum does she value through her re-performances? A better question for the purpose of this essay is what can/do performance scholars discover about the nature of performances viewed as experiments in form and process? In the photographs of Abramović's re-performance of *Dead Hare*, she mimetically engages Beuys' performance. She too has a dead hare, a face covered with gold leaf, and a series of pictures to explain to the "animal." The photos depict her in various states of communication with the hare: the storyteller, the teacher, the confidante. Yet just like the audience in Beuys' piece, I cannot hear her speak. I have the "silence" of the photograph to help me make sense of the performance. But even if the photo does not actually talk, it is not silent. I recognize that much exceeds Abramović's re-performance of Beuys' piece. Rather than considering excess as something that Abramović's performance lacks, I view excess as necessarily connected with her performance, as a process that pulls performer and audience like a tractor beam into a future of imagination, inspiration, and longing.

Day 6- Monday
00:00:04:06

Man: Why do you think she's doing this?

Woman: She can see her reflection.

Man: Just looking in the mirror.

Woman: (laughs) I don't know, she becomes kind of aware of herself for a moment like seeing herself. For a moment like seeing herself.⁵²

RE:PERFORMANCES

6th Night:

Marina Abramović

Lips of Thomas

Galerie Krinzinger, Innsbruck

Monday, November 14, 1975

Original Duration: 2 hours.⁵³

On night six of *Seven Easy Pieces* Abramović finally covered one of her own performances from the mid 1970s. Originally in *Lips of Thomas* Abramović performed a series of actions in front of an audience that provoked the viewers to halt the action during the performance. In the book *Seven Easy Pieces* she describes her performance:

I slowly eat 1 kilo of honey with a silver spoon.
I slowly drink 1 liter of red wine out of a crystal glass.
I break the glass with my right hand.
I cut a five-pointed star on my stomach with a razor blade.
I violently whip myself until I no longer feel any pain.
I lay down on a cross made of ice blocks.
The heat of a suspended heater pointed at my stomach causes the cut star to bleed.
The rest of my body begins to freeze.
I remain on the ice for thirty minutes until the audience interrupts the pieces by removing the ice blocks from underneath.⁵⁴

Photos of her first performance of *Lips of Thomas* reveal an extremely messy body lying on the ice blocks, covered in blood seeping from the star cut into her stomach. The black and white tones of the photos enhance the messy quality through the lack of colors—the color of the blood mixes

with her pubic hair, the shadows on her arms mixes with the hair on her head, and the darkened heater hangs above her body. The dark tones of the photograph stand in stark contrast to the white stage, Abramović's fair skin, and the blocks of ice.

The photographs of Abramović's re-performance of *Lips of Thomas* stand in stark contrast to those of the first performance. Saturated colors pour out from every inch of the photographs. The stage is still stark white, but the subtle changes in the tones of the bottle of wine, the burgundy of the whip, the dark brown of the hanging heater, and the warm peach hue of Abramović's body belie the resolute darkness of each in the photographs of the first performance. The most notable difference is the way the cuts on her stomach changed in the re-performance. In the re-performance of *Lips of Thomas*, Abramović was reopening the scar of the star she originally cut into her stomach in 1975. In her first performance the amount of blood was noticeably different than in the second performance. Photographs show her lying on her back with a massive amount of blood covering her entire torso. It seemed to run down onto her legs, and off the sides of her body. In the re-performance at the Guggenheim, her reopened star scar only produced small amounts of blood, beading on top of the scar, slowly dripping in a single line down her lower abdomen.

The difference in Abramović's bodily production of blood is an important point of departure for my analysis of *Seven Easy Pieces*. The scars of her first performance still occupied her body even after the performance was over. However, when she re-performed the piece in 2005, the same scar was reopened during the performance, to dramatically different results. Looking more like a drawing of a star in red pen, Abramović slowly cut along the dotted line of her former performance, letting little traces of her first rise to the surface of her skin. In a performance charged with concrete material stakes, Abramović deftly provides a space that highlights the ways that repeating a performance, even one of her own making, changes those stakes by engaging the performance as a performative process. Much like the star scar, the difference of Abramović's body highlights the ways that the re-performance of *Lips of Thomas* is different, but inextricably connected to the first. I know it is the same person and the same body as in the first performance. But in the photographs of the re-performance Abramović's body looks different, it feels different. Abramović looks older in her face and has much longer hair. Her breasts are fuller and her hips wider. Her knees are wrinkled and weathered. Her skin looks warmer. Her body demonstrates the passage of time and the process of the history of every day lived beyond the night of the first performance. Her body asks me to consider its difference through a process of representing itself performatively. In order to consider her body and the re-performance of *Lips of Thomas* as performative, I absolutely need the first

performance to carry traces of itself through history and into my present analysis. Much like the star scar on her stomach, the first performance does not disappear. Rather the “original” and re-performance of *Lips of Thomas* weave themselves together through the history of her living body, memory, and documentary archive. It seems unfair to cement the status of such a performance in terms of disappearance. The manner in which we understand and construct history is a performance. Rather than insisting that the acts of the performing bodies of the past have disappeared under the ocean of history, I argue that a more fruitful mode of analysis is needed that searches the horizon of the ocean for the rolling waves of history.

Abramović’s re-performance of *Lips of Thomas* was different in other ways. In between the reopening of the scar on her stomach and whipping herself, she held a white cloth to her bloodied scar and then hoisted it as a type of flag. She also wore a military style hat and boots and included the text of a Slavic song of pride as she waved the flag stained with her blood, naked in front of the audience. Alongside the host of historical changes and alterations to her body, the history of the place where she was born also changed and altered from when she originally performed the piece. Although never explicitly referenced in the piece, the connection between Abramović’s progression over time as a performer and the progression of change in the former Yugoslavia denotes an absolute identity marked as constantly evolving over time. While a detailed explanation of the incredibly complex history and important political dimensions of Yugoslavia and the other countries in and around the Balkans is beyond the scope of this essay, I point to the simple gesture of her performing a kind of soldiering body (albeit a body that forces a rethinking of what it means to soldier) which was not present in the first performance, as a reference point to which the audience might take note. A flag is waved, stained with the blood of a reopened scar. A Slavic song of faith is decreed. My mind races to a million different places when I think of what that part of the performance means in terms of her identity. However, just as quickly, I remember that like the photograph, just as much is happening outside the frame as inside. In a simple act of remembrance, Abramović demonstrates to the audience that just as important as what you see in a performance, or history for that matter, is what you don’t see but is there nonetheless.

Day Six—Monday
00:19:29:90

Man: But how, how’s it connected to the main theme of everything? It doesn’t go.

Woman: But you were telling me it’s all political?

Man: Sometimes yeah, no it's not, it's more, it's more some (pause), it's so difficult. It's not more political, it's more human.

Woman: Hmmm . . .

. . . Man: And reminiscent, reminiscent from her past, from her, that's what I see.

Woman: Oh yeah.

Man: But this gesture, I don't understand.⁵⁵

7th Night:

Marina Abramović

Entering the Other Side

Living Installation

2005.⁵⁶

The final performance of *Seven Easy Pieces* was the only “original” performance of the seven in that it had never been performed before. In it Abramović stood upon a high ladder of some kind, wearing a gigantic blue dress that flowed down her body and over the ladder onto a large circular platform below her. Standing some forty to fifty feet in the air, she silently looked out at the audience around. She included the description: “The artist is present, here and now.” The irony of stating that “the artist is present” should not be forgotten in relation to the other six performances during the week. What type of presence exactly? Surely the artist’s body that made the performance is present, but the performativity of “presence,” how different iterations of the concept of “presence” were engaged, is also acutely on display during *Entering the Other Side*. The Guggenheim museum is laid out as a series of circles spiraling up several floors above the entry level. On each floor of the ascending spiral are places to stand and stare down, rooms containing other artworks, and works actually displayed on the walls of the spiraling stairs. During the performance, audience members were spread throughout multiple floors of the Guggenheim, watching Abramović silently stare back at them, turning and moving ever so slowly in her gigantic blue dress, the intense gaze emanating from Abramović a form of energy presence being highlighted in the performance. In an interview with Thomas McEvelley, Abramović describes her desire to create an intense connection with her audience: “the only thing that’s necessary is that you create the space and time field. You announce the performance for a certain place and time. Then the public will enter that field. Everything else has to be an energy dialogue with no object. This is the main thing: no object in between.”⁵⁷

The energy connection between Abramović and the audience during *Entering the Other Side* is displayed quite beautifully in the photographs

of the performance. Scores of people line the spiraling staircase at multiple levels, looking out at Abramović's outstretched arms, meeting her intense gaze with a wide array of reactions. Abramović's various physical gestures and intense stares seem to unfurl from the deep blue of her dress like incandescent fish from the deep of the sea. What exactly is going on in those moments of connection between the performer and the audience is difficult to describe, let alone quantify. *Entering the Other Side* is a departure in some ways from the previous performances of *Seven Easy Pieces*, and in some ways it is the perfect end-piece. Billed as a "living installation," Abramović's final performance, while performed for the first time, directly ties into the overall theme of performance covers. Combining "living" with "installation" connects her performing body back to the performances and performing bodies of the other artists in *Seven Easy Pieces*. While not explicitly referenced, the other performances covered by Abramović in *Seven Easy Pieces* are impossible to forget because of Abramović herself. Although Abramović is the only performer during *Entering the Other Side*, her gaze and connection with the other audience members continually reminds the audience that in order for her to get to the point of contact with them, she had to travel through five other artists, six other performances, and seven nights of performing. The time and space created by the whole of the seven performances became encapsulated in the stark beauty of her towering figure, draped in blue, reaching out for contact.

The other performances may have disappeared from sight, but as I have argued throughout this essay, I do not believe that that which has disappeared from view does not haunt the senses in other important ways. Rather than looking at each one of the performances in *Seven Easy Pieces* as discrete objects of performance, I have explored the multiplicity of processes at work in Abramović's re-performances as a process of performance criticism and practice. Put another way, although each performance takes place in a particular time and space, those two factors do not solely define the performance. One must look at the wide array of processes at work in the production of performance with the understanding that sometimes the variables at work in an experiment remain unseen or unnoticed. Abramović's re-performances in *Seven Easy Pieces* complicate the status of performance as an object with a concrete essence unto itself. By experimenting with different ways of playing the sample or performance, different ways of documenting and archiving the performance as part of the performance itself, and different forms of response to performance work that deals with these complex issues, I argue that performance is a process of continual negotiation and reorientation. I feel like I am repeating myself and moving in circles, but I think that might be the point. If writing about performance that happened is essentially writing about something

we remember, is there a way to extend that which we write about *through the very manner* in which we write about it? Can we stave off the nagging concern that the ontology of performance dictates a disappearance? Is there a way to talk about memory or event that continues to produce long after it happens, long after we are gone?

Day 7—Tuesday
00:47:10:00

Man: Well you know let's meet up in 40 years and go to the MoMA, you going to see her flag hanging there

Man 2: Uh-Huh, uh-huh.

*Man 1: That's going to be her blood, that's going to be her DNA or in 150 years when we are all not here that's still going to be hanging there.*⁵⁸

NOTES

Acknowledgement: Parts of this essay appeared in my dissertation entitled “Processes and/of Performance: Difference, Memory, and Experimentation,” directed by Dr. Tracy Stephenson Shaffer.

1. Marina Abramović, “Reenactment,” in *Seven Easy Pieces* ed. Marina Abramović (Milan: Edizioni Charta, 2007) 9-11.

2. RZA, *The Wu-Tang Manual* (New York: Penguin, 2005) 196

3. Abramović, *Seven Easy Pieces* (Milan: Edizioni Charta, 2007) 68. This is the first in a series of quotes taken from various documentarian and audience reactions recorded over the week of *Seven Easy Pieces*. The inclusion of these quotes enacts my own performance on the page of select elements, experiences, and sources of inspiration/reflection for both Abramović’s documentation of *Seven Easy Pieces*, and the audience’s process of meaning-making viewing the performances. By including the quotes in a performative manner on the page, I engage some of the same processes of constructing and documenting my criticism that Abramović explored during *Seven Easy Pieces*. In an attempt to performatively engage many of the processes of performance creation and documentation at work in *Seven Easy Pieces*, I utilize certain formal characteristics of the performances and their documents in the writing of this essay. These performative passages are not necessarily framed explicitly throughout the chapter; rather, they are cited in the endnote section. I utilize select formal qualities discovered in my analysis of Abramović’s performance processes in an ongoing and ever-changing manner. As new discoveries are made my use of performative critique also changes. Most important to my analysis is linking the process of experimentation Abramović undertakes with my own methodology of critiquing *Seven Easy Pieces*. The result is a document that challenges the reader in many of the same ways I read Abramović doing with her audience in *Seven Easy Pieces*.

5. Paul Ricouer, *Memory, History, Forgetting* trans. Kathleen Blamey & David Pellauer (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2004) 148.
6. See Peggy Phelan, *Unmarked: The Politics of Performance* (New York: Routledge, 1993) & Philip Auslander, *Liveness: Performance in a Mediatized Culture* (New York: Routledge, 1999).
7. Mindy Fenske, "The Aesthetic of the Unfinished: Ethics and Performance," *Text and Performance Quarterly* 24.1 (2004): 15.
8. See Roland Barthes, *S/Z: An Essay* trans. Richard Miller (Hill and Wang, 1975) & Barthes, *Image/Music/Text* trans. Stephen Heath (London: Fontana Press, 1977). For Barthes, a writerly text is different from a readerly text in that the reader becomes a producer of meaning alongside the writer rather than simply a consumer of meaning. The writerly process is one where play, intertextuality, association, and surrealism operate freely. For more examples of other scholars working with similar ideas of textual composition see Ruth Laurion Bowman & Michael Bowman, "On the Bias: From Performance of Literature to Performance Composition," *The SAGE Handbook of Performance Studies* eds. D. Soyini Madison & Judith Hamera (Thousand Oaks: SAGE Publications, 2006); Gregory L. Ulmer, *Heuristics* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins UP, 1994); Mindy Fenske, "The Movement of Interpretation: Conceptualizing Performative Encounters With Multimediated Performance," *Text and Performance Quarterly* 26.2 (2006): 138-161; Craig Gingrich-Philbrook, "Autoethnography's Family Values: Easy Access to Compulsory Experiences," *Text and Performance Quarterly* 25.4 (2005): 297-314.
9. Johanna Burton, "Repeat Performance," *Artforum International* 45.1 (2006): 55.
10. Burton, 56.
11. Abramović, *Seven Easy Pieces*, 1.
12. The use of the term "productive" throughout this essay reflects a Deleuzian or Foucaultian sensibility of increasing the productive capacity of a thing, rather than a value statement of something as beneficial.
13. Abramović, *Seven Easy Pieces*, 58.
14. Nikki T. Cesare & Jenn Joy, "Performa/(Re)Performa," *TDR* 50.1 (2006): 170
15. Cesare & Joy, 170.
16. Ricoueur, 56.
17. Abramović, *Seven Easy Pieces*, 59.
18. Burton, 55.
19. Nancy Spector, "Marina Abramović Interviewed," in *Seven Easy Pieces* ed. Marina Abramović (Milan: Edizioni Charta, 2007) 23.
20. Abramović, *Seven Easy Pieces*, 68.
21. Abramović, *Seven Easy Pieces*, 70.
22. Abramović, *Seven Easy Pieces*, 70.
23. Abramović. *Seven Easy Pieces*, 75. (Spoken by Abramović from under the stage, amplified through a sound system, recorded on tape by the documentary film crew)
24. Abramović, *Seven Easy Pieces*, 97.
25. Abramović, *Seven Easy Pieces*, 78.
26. Abramović, *Seven Easy Pieces*, 87.
27. Philip Auslander, "The Performativity of Performance Documentation," *PAJ* 84 (2006): 1-2.
28. Auslander, "The Performativity of Performance Documentation," 6.
29. Theresa Smalac, "Not What It Seems: The Politics of Re-Performing Vito

- Acconci's *eedbed*," *Postmodern Culture* 17.1 (2006): 4.
30. Abramović, *Seven Easy Pieces*, 117.
 31. Abramović, *Seven Easy Pieces*, 118.
 32. Peggy Phelan, "Survey," in *Art and Feminism* ed. Helena Reckitt (New York: Phaidon, 2001) 17.
 33. Abramović, *Seven Easy Pieces*, 118.
 34. Burton, 56.
 35. Burton, 56.
 36. Burton, 56.
 37. Burton, 56.
 38. Abramović, *Seven Easy Pieces*, 136
 39. Abramović, *Seven Easy Pieces*, 156
 40. Abramović, *Seven Easy Pieces*, 156.
 41. RoseLee Goldberg, *Performance: Live Art Since 1960* (New York: Harry N. Abrams Inc., 1998) 97.
 42. Juan Vicente Aliaga, "The Folds of the Wound: On Violence, Gender, and Actionism in the Work of Gina Pane," *ARTECONTEXTO* 5 (2005): 77.
 43. Phelan, "Survey," 44.
 44. See WG Sebald, *The Rings of Saturn* (London: The Harvill Press, 1998) 57.
 45. Abramović, *Seven Easy Pieces*, 173-174.
 46. Abramović, *Seven Easy Pieces*, 176.
 47. Valerie Casey, "Staging Meaning in the Modern Museum," *TDR* 49.3 (2005): 78.
 48. Goldberg, 38.
 49. Casey, 78.
 50. Abramović, *Seven Easy Pieces*, 176.
 51. Abramović, *Seven Easy Pieces*, 176.
 52. Abramović, *Seven Easy Pieces*, 218.
 53. Abramović, *Seven Easy Pieces*, 192.
 54. Abramović, *Seven Easy Pieces*, 192.
 55. Abramović, *Seven Easy Pieces*, 219.
 56. Abramović, *Seven Easy Pieces*, 22.
 57. Thomas McEvelley, "Stages of Energy: Performance at Ground Zero?" in *Artist Body* ed. Marina Abramović (Milan: Charta, 1998) 22.
 58. Abramović, *Seven Easy Pieces*, 229.