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## From the Instructor

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Ryan Lader wrote “The Artist Is Present and the Emotions Are Real: Time, Vulnerability, and Gender in Marina Abramovic’s Performance Art” for his capstone essay in a WR 100 “Gendered Expressions of Performance” seminar focused on women playwrights and performance artists. Students’ examination of gender politics culminated with Serbian-born performance artist Marina Abramovic’s 2010 Museum of Modern Art retrospective “The Artist Is Present.” Abramovic’s equally subtle and strenuous performance challenged students’ notions of art, and questioned the importance of gender in a seemingly “gendered-less” performance.

Lader’s essay does an excellent job of creating a conversation with various (and at times fairly disparate) sources: a gender theorist, a performance artist, and a theatre director. By engaging these sources, Lader finds a way into Abramovic’s cerebral art; he ultimately better understands why her art so fiercely impacts the audience through the critical, and creative, connections he makes. Lader worked especially hard on incorporating Judith Butler’s seminal essay, “Performative Acts and Gender Constitution,” which was the seminar’s most challenging text. Lader’s rigorous intellectual work to find intersections between Abramovic and Butler paid off: his argument pushes through surface-based and reactionary observations of Abramovic’s controversial performance and examines its subterranean intelligence.

— Carrie Bennett

WR 100: Gendered Expressions of Performance

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## From the Writer

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My final paper, “The Artist Is Present and the Emotions Are Real: Time, Vulnerability, and Gender in Marina Abramovic’s Performance Art,” examines several aspects of performance art—vulnerability, time, and gender—to determine their overall contribution to the audience’s emotional response. Marina Abramovic’s performance, “The Artist Is Present,” is used as a lens for my argument. At the MOMA in New York City, Abramovic invites strangers to stare at her in silence for as long as they please. Things become quite interesting when various participants break down into tears for no apparent reason. Overall, I think much of this paper’s success stems from how interesting the topic is. Who would expect emotion from a seeming *lack* of interaction?

— Ryan Lader

## THE ARTIST IS PRESENT AND THE EMOTIONS ARE REAL: TIME, VULNERABILITY, AND GENDER IN MARINA ABRAMOVIC'S PERFORMANCE ART

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If you were to stare into the eyes of a complete stranger for a long time, would you expect to be emotionally broken? Performance artist Marina Abramovic creates this scenario in her piece “The Artist Is Present,” which takes place at the Museum of Modern Art in New York City. One at a time, she invites strangers to sit across from her and stare into her eyes for as long as they please. Often times, people start to cry and become overwhelmed. How could performing such a simple act elicit such a strong emotional response? Anne Bogart, Artistic Director of SITI Company, provides a useful voice to answer this question. She offers two pieces that examine the aspects of theatrical performance: “Time” and “Magnetism.” “Time” examines how altering the time frame of a performance can produce different results. Taking this into consideration, Abramovic stares at strangers for seven hours a day for three months, and the audience often participates for long periods at a time. The minuscule action involved in her performance contrasts with its lengthy time span, and I hypothesize that this long time span contributes to the audiences’ emotional response. Additionally, “Magnetism” examines the effects of the performer and audiences’ shared empathy for one another. This “human heartbeat”—in other words, shared humanity—creates vulnerability, allowing for a more “personal and intimate” experience of the performance (Bogart 65). Moreover, the vulnerability created by Abramovic in her audience allows her to reveal suppressed sadness within the participant. Although Bogart’s pieces involve theatre rather than performance art, they share a “performing” aspect; thus, their sources are useful for examining Abramovic’s performance. Lastly, American philosopher and gender theorist Judith Butler

offers an essay written in 1988 called “Performative Acts and Gender Constitution” explaining that gender is an ever-changing social construction of the way we act (Butler 531). According to Butler, a woman (in this case Abramovic) is seen by society as having maternal characteristics: to what extent does this affect the way people react to her presence? The goal of this essay is to examine these aspects—vulnerability, time, and gender—and consider which elements of Abramovic’s performance contribute most directly to the audience’s emotional response.

## Abramovic’s Use of Time Contrast

According to Bogart, time is a tool used to control how an audience perceives a performance, which exposes Abramovic’s use of time to affect her subjects. Bogart uses an anecdote in which a Swiss geologist examined the mental states of several people who had experienced near-death falls in the Alps. She notes that “mental activity became enormous, rising to hundred-fold velocity. Time became greatly expanded” (128). In the context of a near-death experience, peoples’ thoughts race because of a natural human reaction to the situation. Normally, people fail to think at this pace; however, the context of the situation causes time to be *perceived* as expanded because an abundance of thought takes place relative to a short time span. Taking this into consideration, the opposite is true: the performer can use time to change the context of a situation. This scenario can be true in non-near-death experiences, but on an intentional artistic level. Abramovic does so in “The Artist Is Present” when she slows down time by incorporating very little interaction into a long time span. Director Robert Wilson can relate: “In my pieces everything is slowed down. If it’s going to take me five minutes to pick up a spoon, first of all it’s going to be painful just to control it. But what happens to with my awareness of my body as I do it?” (qtd. in Bogart 133). According to Wilson, your body naturally analyzes actions in “real” time; when you slow down your regular actions to a much longer time scale, you have more time to analyze everything that occurs in that moment, including your own thought process. Picking up a spoon normally takes a short moment, but stretching this action out to five minutes exponentially increases your awareness of the action. Further, when the audience member participates in Abramovic’s long performance, she has time to metacognitively reflect on her actions

and environment, enabling an altered perception of the act. Abramovic controls her audience in this manner by contrasting time length with size of interaction. Later on, we will directly examine to what extent this time scale elicits an emotional response in the participant.

Returning to the aspect of time, Abramovic's lengthy performance allows the audience member enough time to "sink in" to the performance and become vulnerable to Abramovic's silent examination. Let us first examine the length of the performance. The audience members ultimately decide how long to stay, because they can walk away whenever they please; however, more people decide to sit for a long time. One audience member commented, "she slows everybody's brain down, she asks us to stay there for quite a length of time . . . she transforms us as a result" (*The Artist Is Present*). Abramovic never asks anyone to stay for any length of time, but we can see that this audience member believes so; because of this, we see an established connection between Abramovic and her audience. During this length of time, she "slows down" the brain by creating a contrast between time and interaction. Remember Robert Wilson's comment about spending five minutes to pick up a spoon? Bogart would argue that this contrast between time span and interaction allows for one's thoughts to race at said "ten-fold velocity." An eleven year-old boy described his experience with mysterious nostalgia: "It's like some other world . . . and time flies quicker" (*The Artist Is Present*). Judging by this, the "other world" must be a state of consciousness created by the performance's length of time. After a while, the audience enters this state of mind where thoughts at ten-fold velocity occur. Due to Abramovic's silent examinations and eye contact, the audience becomes vulnerable.

## Empathy and Vulnerability

Additionally, the empathy shared between the performer and audience reveals how Abramovic's audience is left vulnerable by her stare. In "Magnetism," Bogart explains that a performance becomes attractive when it exhibits characteristics with which the audience can identify. Commenting on how the audience identifies with a performance, Bogart writes, "the human heartbeat serves as the red thread through any theatrical labyrinth and will lead to the vulnerability at center of the event" (65). In other words, even the most complicated performance—the "theatrical

labyrinth”—exhibits the characteristic of human nature (i.e. the human heartbeat) to which the audience can relate. According to Bogart, because of the shared humanity between performer and audience, vulnerability surrounds the performance; the audience member begins to carry out self-reflection when she sees this commonality in the performance. In the case of “The Artist Is Present,” because the audience member can only think in the given situation, she may be wondering about Abramovic’s thoughts too, which leaves her subject to Abramovic’s silent examination. We will later examine the extent to which this “silent examination,” combined with the observer’s vulnerability, emotionally affects the audience.

Abramovic’s use of time sets the stage for vulnerability, resulting in pain within the audience members. The contrast between time span and interaction creates the “mental zone” in which thoughts at ten-fold velocities occur. In addition, Bogart would argue that the humanity shared between Abramovic and the audience creates an unspoken empathy “which leads to vulnerability at the center of the event” (65). The act is so simple that the audience has the time to analyze its simplicity: we are both here, and we are both human; we share that with each other. The performance creates vulnerability because hiding behind anything is impossible, especially physically. In fact, set design removed the table that was originally present between Abramovic and her audience to increase this vulnerability factor. The curator of “The Artist Is Present,” Klaus Biesenbach, commented that the lack of the table makes Abramovic much more vulnerable and “makes her very unprotected . . . but it heightens the seriousness...and the severe nature of the piece” (*The Artist Is Present*). The woeful reactions of sobbing audience members elucidate this seriousness and severe nature. These reactions almost always consist of the audience beginning to shed tears, while maintaining the stare with Abramovic the entire time (*The Artist Is Present*). Further, prolonged eye contact causes vulnerability; one audience member commented that eye contact is strange because “most of us are afraid of it and Marina is offering it infinitely” (*The Artist Is Present*). Humans avoid eye contact, but this performance is based around it, thus causing the audience to become vulnerable. The audience as well as Abramovic accept this vulnerability. The unavoidable silent examination then creates the window for an emotional response to occur. Abramovic offers another point of view: “they’re sitting there; I’m just a

mirror of their own self” (*The Artist Is Present*). The audience members subconsciously analyze their own thoughts and feelings (the metacognitive process that Bogart mentions, expressed earlier) all while having to maintain the stare of vulnerability. As a result, people often become overwhelmed by their own painful feelings. Abramovic sympathizes, “Some of them are really open to feel incredible pain. Some of them have so much pain” (*The Artist Is Present*). She consequently tries to stay open to feel incredible pain because openness comes from the willingness of the participant, thus creating vulnerability within the scenario. Bogart believes that this ability consequently allows one to identify and understand another person’s emotions (65). The vulnerability of the participant proves integral in the emotional response of the participant, but could not exist without Abramovic’s creative use of contrasting time span with minimal interaction.

## Does Gender Affect an Audience’s Perception?

Aside from the performance’s direct components of time manipulation and vulnerability, the factor of gender is another debatable force that affects the performance’s effect on its audience. Gender theorist Judith Butler argues that gender is a social construction, which sheds light on how Abramovic’s womanhood affects her audiences’ perception of “The Artist Is Present.” In “Performative Acts and Gender Construction,” Butler explains that we construct gender through a “stylized repetition of acts” that conforms to how *society* views those acts with respect to the male or female category (519). She further begins to explain that the body is the stylized medium, and that “the body is not self-identical or merely factic materiality; it is a materiality that bears meaning . . . and the manner of this bearing is fundamentally dramatic” (521). The manner of the body’s materiality being fundamentally “dramatic” expresses that what we put on socially, mentally, and physically constructs a gender. In other words, the way we present ourselves externally points to our constructed genders. Simply put, we construct gender through expression and do not create this characteristic at birth. As Simone de Beauvoir claims, “one is not born, but, rather, *becomes* a woman” (qtd. in Butler 519). People become women through the stylized repetition of “womanly” acts. We can easily categorize “womanly acts” because we construct them as a society. Using gender as a

lens through which to examine “The Artist Is Present” proves especially useful because Abramovic uses the body as a medium for her performance act, and Butler depends on the body as a central aspect of her argument. Later, we will analyze how Abramovic’s gender contributes to how the audience receives her performance.

In addition, the extent that Abramovic’s womanliness affects the audience and elicits an emotional response must be determined. When you put yourself in the position of the audience, you are sitting across from a woman, and that is the extent of the sexuality you encounter throughout the piece. Does sitting across from what society views as a maternal figure cause people to seek compassion for their inner pain? I ask this because oftentimes, society regards women as more caring and compassionate than men. In addition to arguing that gender is a social construction, gender theorist Judith Butler argues, “To be female is[...] a facticity which has no meaning, but to be a woman is to have *become* a woman, to compel the body to conform to an historical idea of ‘woman,’ to induce the body to become a cultural sign” (522). What Butler means is that to be a woman, one must externally display womanly characteristics and *act* like a woman in society would act. In “The Artist Is Present,” Abramovic is better characterized as a female than a woman because she does not act in any womanly way that abides by womanly social constructs. Staring and sitting in a chair—the only action taken by Abramovic—can be performed by both men *and* women. Although audience members can see Abramovic’s womanly stylization of the body, they cannot fully regard her as a woman due to the lack of stylized repetition of *acts* that constitute her womanhood (Butler 519). Even then, her stylization of the body involves dressing in a robe much like a monk would, which makes her seem even less “womanly” (*The Artist Is Present*). Because the audience cannot identify womanhood with Abramovic directly with respect to her actions, the audience is likely to not seek compassion in the performer and emotionally respond directly due to gender. Therefore, with regards to causing an emotional response in the audience, gender does not affect the audience in comparison to time and vulnerability, which work together.

Although we have deduced that both time and vulnerability contribute more exactly to emotional response than gender, we must consider how gender is perhaps a directly contributing factor. For example, what



if Abramovic were a man? To understand the significance of this question, let's turn to Judith Butler and her notion of gender. By man, I mean holding the external characteristics of what society views as a "manly" man: for example, a chiseled jaw or rugged beard. I deduce that one is less likely to break down in front of a man because society sees this as a sign of weakness. People in general are more likely to become vulnerable in the presence of a woman because of the "historical idea" that women are caring and motherly figures in society. So what if a "manly" male is the performer? Anthropologist Victor Turner argues that gender is a "social action [that] requires a performance which is *repeated*" (qtd. in Butler 526). While this is agreeable with Butler's argument, there is no gendered "act" that takes place in "The Artist Is Present" because the act is not associated with a repeated social norm with respect to a certain gender. In fact, Abramovic's ex-lover, Ulay, (Frank Uwe Laysiepen) sits across from Abramovic, and they both begin to sob and reach for each other's hands after some time (*"The Artist Is Present"*). We have both genders present in this situation that emotionally react to the performance; therefore, there is little possibility of gender having a substantial effect on the vulnerability and thus emotional response of the audience because the act itself is not gendered. However, if the act were to be changed, perhaps if Abramovic were nude for the performance, one would be more aware of her womanly "stylization of the body" that Butler argues constitutes genderization. Even then, the maximum effects of gender are only yielded when the act itself has characteristics of a historically constructed gender; therefore, in the case of "The Artist Is Present," gender's effects are incomparable to vulnerability and time contrast. With regards to this, one cannot argue that vulnerability causes these responses, as throughout "The Artist Is Present," people break down during longer performances, and the *time contrast* is what causes the metacognitive thought process leading to *vulnerability*, allowing for a self-reflective thought process in the presence of Abramovic.

We have concluded that out of three aspects of Abramovic's performance—time contrast, vulnerability, and gender—time contrast and vulnerability contribute most directly to the emotional responses that occur during "The Artist Is Present." The fact that such a simple act of observing one another in silence can elucidate deep emotional reaction is shocking, but is logically explained when one examines the contrast of

how long the actual performance can be and how little physically occurs; self-reflection occurs rapidly, empathy shared between performer and audience causes vulnerability, and Abramovic acts as a “mirror” of the subject’s pain to him or her self. One may consider that the audience may be more inclined to seek compassion in Abramovic due to her gender; however, Butler’s argument about how we construct gender counters the fact, because Abramovic’s act is gender-neutral. What if we consider Abramovic’s previous performances and her use of stylization of the body? Abramovic would often appear nude in her performances, using her body as a medium for self-inflicted pain; however, “The Artist Is Present” is different because although she uses her body as a medium for the act, the act is relatively “genderless,” whereas in previous performances, the nudity would have clear implications that surrounded gender as the body is exposed in its purest form. What could Abramovic be saying about gender by straying from her usual gendered appearance in her performance art? Perhaps she is denying the importance of gender in performance art and in life by constructing a gender-neutral act. Regardless of her intentions, we cannot completely discard gender as a contributing factor of human interaction. For example, men often hold the door for women as a sign of gender courtesy. How could one ignore Abramovic’s beautiful womanly face, her long black hair? Perhaps our perceptions are a bit altered despite our ignorance. Nevertheless, Abramovic’s strong use of time and vulnerability as tools in performance art overshadow gender, evoking a powerful response in her audience during “The Artist Is Present.”

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RYAN LADER is a rising sophomore in Boston University's College of Engineering, planning to major in mechanical engineering and minor in finance. Lader was born and raised in a Long Island suburban community. He wrote this paper for WR 100, and would like to dedicate his work to both his family and Carrie Bennett, his writing professor.