

Love Story

Elizabeth Pearce

Marina Abramović once swapped roles for the night with an Amsterdam prostitute. One woman attended the gallery opening of a new show, while the other stood in a window, soliciting clients. This was the first thing I ever knew about her and it still floors me when I think of it.

I wanted to pull out of writing this essay because the more I think about Marina's work the less I want to mar it with analysis. We've just (at time of writing) finished putting together a Matthew Barney exhibition. That work is very demanding, in an interpretive sense. Barney was delving into the well of common human knowledge and drawing forth a dense, deeply masculine mythology. You have to learn the language before you can speak Barney, you have to do the work. Marina is the perfect undoing of all that. You must unlearn, clear away the clutter. And that is hard. People close to me—ones with interest but no investment in the art world—ask me about Marina: Why did this woman scream until she lost her voice? Stand still while her partner pointed a bow and arrow at her heart? Sit in a gallery for three months, meeting members of the public with perfect silence? And I want this essay to be my answer, but when I try to form it, my mind slides into mush. I keep hearing Picasso:

It took me four years to paint like Raphael, but a lifetime to paint like a child.

Or Nabokov, telling his students, in a literature lecture, that to appreciate Dickens we have to just 'relax and let our spines take over':

Although we read with our minds, the seat of artistic delight is between the shoulder blades ... Let us worship the spine and its tingle.¹

¹ [*Vladimir Nabokov, Lectures on Literature*](#), Harcourt Publishing Company, New York, NY, 1980, p. 64.

(And why did she walk towards her lover from one end of the Great Wall of China, to meet him in the middle and mark the end of their affair?)

The prostitute work, called *Role Exchange*, took place in 1975. Marina was still living with her mother in Belgrade but had been invited to Amsterdam to take part in a Dutch TV program about performance art. ‘I had a very strict upbringing in the former Yugoslavia,’ says Marina, ‘[being a] prostitute was just about the lowest you can get.’² But even these murky insights start to cloud your clear view. You don’t need context to understand *Role Exchange*: you don’t need tales of Marina’s draconian mother nor the regimental Communist mindset into which she was born, nor even the burgeoning of body and performance art in the 1970s, part of which was about resisting the commodification of art-as-object; and you certainly don’t need the women’s rights and sexual liberation movements. No, you don’t need all that to ‘get’ *Role Exchange*. It’s right there already, in your spine. Or specifically, for me, my lower intestine.

Aside: Why am I spending so much time talking about a work that isn’t on display at Mona? Such is the totality—the total body, to use a common art-world metaphor—of Marina’s work. What I mean is that none of its parts exist in isolation, each is a metonym for the others: a part that represents, in microcosm, the organic operation of the entire beast. This, despite the fact that she manages to eschew trite repetition. The reason it feels fresh each time is because she seems to somehow bypass cognition, the kind that might see too clearly her own significance as an artist, and thereby start to imitate herself—to produce the kind of work Marina Abramović would make—and descend into irrelevance. Consider, conversely, Vito Acconci:

I think the reason I stopped doing live performance was that it started to seem strange to me that everybody who knew a piece of mine knew what I looked like ... I started to feel that my work was about the formation of a kind of personality cult rather than the doing of an activity.³

² <http://www.moma.org/explore/multimedia/audios/190/1970>

³ <http://www.moma.org/explore/multimedia/audios/158>

Now, don't get me wrong, Marina absolutely has attracted a cult of personality. Key words: Lady Gaga, *Sex and the City*, Givenchy. That 'cult' is reflected in our exhibition at Mona: in the portrait of the artist that greets you as you enter the gallery and listen to her recorded 'manifesto', and in the eponymous *Private Archaeology*, 1997–2015, a wooden cabinet containing Marina's personal 'objects and mementos' and through which you are invited to rummage. *Archaeology* may work to fetishise artist detritus. I shall have to wait and see (I'm writing this essay before seeing the exhibition in its entirety). But one thing I'm sure of is that the photo-portrait will exude a quality the film theorist Laura Mulvey calls 'to-be-looked-at-ness'. So, too, will the eighteen works on display in the large video-portrait gallery at the heart of the exhibition, sampled from the spectrum of Marina's career and focusing on her infinitely filmable face. Mulvey is specifically interested in the gendered implications of this phenomenon, arguing that women on screen are passively prostrate before the objectifying male gaze. But for me, it's more about Marina's professional sincerity. I don't mean that she is somehow 'pure', or above strategy and ambition—that would be ridiculous. (Fun fact: in the 1975 recording of the performance *Art Must Be Beautiful, Artist Must Be Beautiful*, which you can see here at Mona, Marina is reperforming the piece *for the second time* immediately after the first. She was unhappy with the recording of the live performance, you see, so demanded that the cameraman re-record it straight away. That ripping, scraping noise you hear beneath her chanting is the sound of metal eating into scalp that's already torn and battered, already hurting from the previous assault.) Indeed, ambition and sincerity—and cults of personality—are not mutually exclusive. Consider *The Artist is Present*, 2010, her triumphant occupation of New York's Museum of Modern Art, the apex of the art world and symbol of her apotheosis from the European avant-garde to universal diva. She could have just done a retrospective; and indeed, the exhibition did include reperformances of some of Marina's most important works, including *Point of Contact*, 1980, on display at Mona, and *Imponderabilia*, 1977, in which Ulay and Marina stood naked, opposite each other in the entry to a gallery, so that visitors who wished to enter had to squeeze through a doorway of flesh. But rather than just sit back and applaud herself, Marina chose instead to sit on a chair at a table in the MoMA gallery, all day every day, for three months—the entire duration of the exhibition—meeting members of the public with eye contact, stillness and silence. The artist is present. It is my sense, given the depth of Marina's Zen-sincerity, that

she meant the title innocently: she was ‘present’ in a simple physical sense and a spiritual sense, attempting (and succeeding, from what I can gather from the extraordinary popularity of the work) to make a simple connection with each stranger before her. The gentle irony of the title—its manner of drawing attention to not only her iconic status, but also the way she has come to define the conventions of an art form that was, itself, an affront to the very idea of artistic convention—was not part of her intention, I’ll wager. That unselfconscious authenticity is why she’s still making work that the ‘cult’ can’t really touch. This is not to say that all her works are as good as each other. She’s done some with too many symbols for my liking, and some that are too minimal as well: her first (rejected) performance proposal involved possibly killing herself by firing a gun at her temple, Russian-roulette style. Suicide is too minimal. Not good art. But her best works constitute a core or canon, a spine if you will, and are recognisably Marina’s—not in the hackneyed way Vito Acconci was worried about, but in the sense that they put into place an action or behaviour that is so powerful in and of itself that it doesn’t need to mean something more. The metaphors and symbols just depart, or they never arrive. And these works do not bear analysis, so please, sir, do not try; just to contemplate them is to enter into a certain frame of mind. In that way, the more recent ‘transitory’ works (the mineral and crystal works), and the mindfulness exercises, offer a direct route to the ‘letting go’ I mentioned at the start.

But back to my gut. I feel sick for her, you see. Partly for the minimal perfection of *Role Exchange* (the prostitute work), its breathtaking self-immolation (literally, my breath is taken). I didn’t need to be there to see it for myself, the notion lives in my mind (is this the greatest kind of performance art? That which passes between us like a virus, far from the original source?) But mainly I feel sick for her because she’s about to meet Ulay. He picked her up at the airport. The gallery had asked him to be her Amsterdam guide. This doesn’t matter in the slightest. Except that I can’t get their love story out of my head. It’s weird to think that by the time you read this, I will have met Marina, and seen for myself that she is a real person, utterly unknown to me, and not just a shape in my imagination, a gathering point for my own fragments of experience. I am embarrassed, in advance, for my future self. How presumptuous, how pompous and preposterous, to dream about another woman’s romance. And worse: I just checked my source, and actually, by the time *Role Exchange* took place,

Marina had already met Ulay. But why quibble with chronology? (I was confusing *Role Exchange* with *Lips of Thomas*, 1975, a demented mating ritual that involved Marina eating a kilo of honey, drinking a litre of wine, cutting a five-pointed star into her stomach, and then kneeling before a photo of the eponymous Thomas—a prior lover—and whipping herself until she bled. Some people are determined to read Marina’s work as feminist. What do they do with a work like *Thomas*? Or with *Light/Dark* from 1977, wherein Ulay and Marina slap each other with increasing ferocity to a dreadful rhythmic tempo, until you can almost stand it no longer, except that the crisp and sickening aesthetic of the image won’t let you look away?⁴) My source is the biography of Marina written by James Westcott, called *When Marina Abramović Dies*. It is not a good book, but that’s probably not its fault: biography is not a good genre. We can’t even get our own stories straight, let alone smooth out the mire of happenstance and self-delusion that constitutes the life of another person. In my own fantasy–biography, Ulay at the airport is Marina’s *Sliding Doors* moment (that Gwyneth Paltrow movie wherein you see two versions of her life, one in which she catches the train, and one in which the doors slide closed on her just before she gets on board). I know, because I know the story—watching from my comfy chair at home—that Marina is about to meet the man with whom she will strive for an impossible dream: symbiosis. More immediately, she is going to go straight to bed

⁴ I should draw a distinction here between academic feminism, which sees ‘woman’ as a social construction, and ordinary, button-down ‘equality’ feminism, which cares about whether real women are given fair opportunity to express their talent, creativity and ingenuity—to be, in short, fully-fledged, and flawed, human subjects. Let’s take, for example, the work *Rhythm 0*, 1974, in which Marina offered viewers seventy-two objects (including a feather, lipstick, a camera, and a gun) to use on her passive body as they chose. Now. Academic feminism runs into trouble here, because it sees all women as signs of Woman more broadly. Is Marina perpetuating an image of women as passive before the violent patriarchal discourse that constructs and constrains them? No, no, returns another the academic-feminist critic: the work is *a comment on* the violence of patriarchal discourse. Phew. Or, in one essay I read, *Lips of Thomas* emphasises ‘the futility of interpretation’ in order to reflect ‘the difficult position that feminist artists occupy’. In other words: it’s hard to understand, so it must be about how people can never understand women. The desperation is hard to miss, here. It reminds me of how good Christians are urged to interpret evidence for God’s non-existence as a test of faith, sent express from Heaven above. And as for normal-person feminists? Well, we can laud a woman like Marina, the mother of artworks—like *Lips of Thomas* and *Rhythm 0*—that have altered the course of art history.

with him ‘for ten days’ and then slink home, morose, to Belgrade, where she will be ‘so in love’ she ‘cannot move or talk’.⁵

Permit me a sigh, please.

But I am perfectly able to grasp the fact that the metaphor for how our lives turn out is not a sliding door at all; rather, it’s a cloud, a buzzing mist of chance, so dense it looks an awful lot like chaos. (It doesn’t help me that they were born on the same day. Ulay told her that at dinner the first night they met, and she didn’t believe him at first, it was too good to be true.) My metaphor calls to mind Marina’s very early cloud paintings, made before she ‘freed’ herself of painting all together—a process by which her fascination with the ethereal and insubstantial slid slowly from the canvas, merged with the world around her for a while, and then returned to find its seat in her own self. (She wasn’t born knowing how to not-paint ‘like a child’; she had to learn.) I’m tempted to find in her clouds an allusion to the natural disorder of things; but no, I know that Marina and I do not think alike. She believes in magic—in destiny, in numerology and telepathy, and in the potential for inanimate objects and minerals to transfer energising properties direct to your own person. How to approach these objects? Where do we find the ‘art’ of them? Nestled in between your disbelief and its suspension?

I think we best imagine the ‘transitory objects’ in concert with their ideal user, the artist herself. In that sense, they highlight an important realisation in my process of coming to understand Marina’s work: her art tends to transmit to me an experience of the world that stands in perfect opposition to the world—hers—in which they were created. In simpler terms: what she means by them is not what they mean to me, at all. She lives in a constructivist⁶ universe, whereby you can change reality with the power of the human mind; the world is what you think it is. Hence the somewhat didactic nature of her newer body of ‘transitory’ work: they are designed to change the world,

⁵ <http://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2010/03/08/walking-through-walls>

⁶ My editor, who, unlike me, knows real stuff about art, pointed out that ‘constructivist’ means something quite specific in the context of art history. However, I’m using it in the general philosophical sense of emphasizing the constructed-ness of reality and identity. This stands in contrast to the principles of rationalism and empiricism, for instance.

by changing—healing—you. In this worldview, people have destinies, and they have true loves brought to them by fate, armed with signs in case you miss them—like a shared birthday. But for me, Marina’s best work applies an intangible medium (time) to a subject matter so minimal it barely exists (shouting until you lose your voice, for instance), and in doing so, slips through the net of our self-serving narratives; but then it doesn’t just evaporate, it drips and pools somewhere at the base of what makes us what we are, condensing and solidifying into something kind of terrible and true. This is what I see, for instance, in a work like *AAA–AAA*, 1978, Ulay and Marina screaming into each other’s open mouth: the very baseline of what it means to relate to another person; the ferocious frustration of trying relentlessly to fuse with them but finding yourself always alone in your own head, screaming to get out. And in *Breathing In/Breathing Out*, 1977: the toxic outcome of our desperate grasp at symbiosis. The truth of my aloneness pulls against the romance of that constructivist, New-Age worldview to which Marina subscribes—as do many of us, albeit in a less obvious form. Imagine, for a moment, a line snaking through the chaos, taking you away from your screaming solitude, towards your one true love—and then onwards, through the story of your life.

It’s tempting to think of love as a progression, from ignorance toward the refined light of reason, but that would be a mistake. The history of love is not a ladder we climb rung by rung leaving previous rungs below. Human history is not a journey across a landscape, in the course of which we leave one town behind as we approach another. Nomads constantly on the move, we carry everything with us, all we possess. We carry the seeds and nails and remembered hardships of everywhere we have lived, the beliefs and hurts and bones of every ancestor. Our baggage is heavy. We can’t bear to part with anything that ever made us human.

—Diane Ackerman, *A Natural History Of Love*⁷

It was in Australia’s Great Victorian Desert that Marina and Ulay thought of walking the Great Wall of China. The idea, then, was to get married in the middle. They believed that old story about the Great Wall being the only human-made object visible

⁷ *Diane Ackerman, A Natural History Of Love*, Vintage Books, New York, NY, 1994, p. xxii.

from the Moon. Apparently, the five-thousand-kilometre dingo fence that cuts off South Australia (to protect its sheep) gave them the idea. Another romantic dream: the futility of human intervention in a vast, primeval space. It is precisely this dream-mythology of the outback and its inhabitants that worried me when I heard about the works inspired by the Australian visit. (Good Lord, is that a boomerang?) But I read an article by Charles Green, and was pleased to discover he'd already worried about this for me. In sum: today, performances like *Nightsea Crossing Conjunction*, 1983—in which Marina, Ulay, a Tibetan lama, and Pintupi artist Charlie Tararu Tjungurrayi sat in silence and stillness for several hours at a time—would be considered perniciously apolitical, an implicit validation of the power imbalances cultural 'conjunction' elides. But: they weren't tacky tourists gawping at the savages, they were deeply connected to and informed about the Aboriginal communities they lived with for months at a time, and they also contributed to the running of those communities in tangible, practical ways. Plus their interaction truly was a 'conjunction', in the sense that their appreciation of various indigenous cultures and practices deeply influenced their work. They 'saw their own performativity and sense of duration deriving from the impact of the Desert painters', says Green.⁸ Plus (and this is me now): shut up, stop whingeing. It's boring. ('There is more to life than culture and politics' is how Green more eloquently put it.⁹)

The boomerang work I mentioned was called *Gold Found By the Artists*, 1981, and it involved Ulay and Marina sitting at a table with a boomerang (and other objects) between them, not moving until the gallery closed or one of them could stand it no longer (they wanted to see if they could charge the energy in the room using only their minds). It would be the inaugural iteration of a mammoth, ninety-part performance piece (*sans* boomerang) called *Nightsea Crossing*, spanning six years and several countries, and it would be Ulay who terminated some performances prematurely due to extreme discomfort and pain. (He was hospitalised more than once, for ribs digging into organs, a hernia on his spine, and a swollen spleen.) In my fantasy-biography, as in the official one by Westcott, *Nightsea Crossing*—mentally, emotionally and physically demanding beyond our understanding—was the beginning

⁸ Charles Green, 'Group soul: who owns the artist fusion?' *Third Text*, vol. 18, no. 6, 2004, p. 602.

⁹ Green, p. 608.

of the end of the affair. The gap in their professional ambition began to widen. ‘For me it is incomprehensible’, Marina wrote in her diary, of Ulay’s failure to see out each sit-in.¹⁰ ‘I think that in his entire life he doubts so much ... I think in this kind of activity like *Nightsea Crossing* you have to be 100 per cent sure if you want to make it, then you can make it.’¹¹ What kind of person is ‘100 per cent sure’ of their intentions? Whatever the answer, it sure gave birth to some cracking art. But no matter, let’s move on. The Wall is in sight.

Eight years and miles and miles of red tape later (the Chinese are a bureaucratic bunch), at the auspicious time of 10.47am on 30 March 1988 (Year of the Dragon), Marina began walking west along the wall, from where the Shanhai Pass rises from the Yellow Sea. At the same moment at the other end of the country Ulay began walking east, from the fortress at the Jiayu Pass in Gansu Province in the Gobi Desert.

You know what happens next. They broke up. Sob. Move on.

The ‘Dragon’ works you see at Mona are a direct outcome of Marina’s experience on the Wall, which brought her closer, she says, to the energies transmitted by the minerals of the earth. (There’s a creation myth of the Wall as the spine of a vanquished sea dragon.) She devised a system of correlation, based on geology and Chinese and Tibetan medicine, between minerals and parts of the body, in the hope that the people using her ‘transitory objects’ would feel as she felt as she walked the wall—rejuvenated, and at peace.¹²

I’ve heard about a man and woman who are walking the length of the Great Wall of China, approaching each other from opposite directions. Every time I think of them, I see them from above, with the Wall twisting and winding through the landscape and two tiny human figures moving towards each other from remote provinces, step by step. I think this is a story of reverence for the planet, of trying to understand how we belong to the planet in a new way.

¹⁰ James Westcott, *When Marina Abramović Dies: A Biography*, The MIT Press, Cambridge, MS, 2010, p. 169.

¹¹ Westcott, p. 190.

¹² Westcott, p. 211.

—Don DeLillo, *Mao II*¹³

Clearly DeLillo was also captivated by the Wall walk. The character in his novel concludes: ‘And it’s strange how I construct an aerial view so naturally’.

Ultimately, it’s that old wrestle with our smallness. I construct that ‘aerial view’ naturally too: the work depends on it. Otherwise it’s just two people trudging turgidly, flanked by lackeys, through a difficult and broken landscape (the Wall is not one, in fact, but several), staying at motels each night because they weren’t allowed to camp, and worrying about how the whole thing would turn out on film. The aerial view belongs to God alone, or possibly Gwyneth Paltrow: either way, it isn’t mine or yours, although it is, undeniably, in our nature to try to behold it.

¹³ *Don DeLillo, Mao II*, Vintage Books, London, 1992, p. 70.