



# Jesper Tang Nielsens tale ved overrækkelsen af Sonningprisen

**Taler**

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**Dato**

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**Sted**

Festsalen på Københavns  
Universitet

**Omstændigheder**

Sonningprisen 2023 blev overrakt til Marina Abramović fredag den 19. april i Festsalen på Københavns Universitet med et års forsinkelse, da pristageren blev ramt af en blodprop sidste år. Sonningprisen, stiftet af forfatter og redaktør C.J. Sonning (1879-1937), er Danmarks største kulturpris.

Most honorable rector, distinguished guests, dear Marina Abramović,

Let me begin in the beginning. In a beginning that never happened and yet everything that happened ever after began with this beginning.

In 1969 a gallery in Belgrade received a proposal for a performance. The proposal reads:

“Upon entering, the public are asked to take all their clothes off and give them to me. While they are waiting, I will wash, dry and iron their clothes and when they are ready, they can dress and leave.”

The gallery rejected the proposal.

The following year the same gallery received another proposal for a new performance. This proposal reads:

“I stand in front of the public dressed in my regular clothes. At the side of the stage there is a clothes rack on which hang the clothes that my mother wanted me to wear. Slowly I take the clothes one by one and I change into them. I stand facing the public for a while. From the right pocket of my shirt I take a gun. From the left pocket of my shirt I take a bullet. I put the bullet into the chamber and turn it. I place the gun to my temple. I pull the trigger. This performance has two possible endings.”

The gallery rejected the proposal.

These two untitled proposals are the first performances Marina Abramović made. They are the beginning of her performance art. They never happened but they are the origin of her work. Rejecting them was the best thing this gallery ever did to performance art. Had they accepted them; we would not be here today. The performances would have terminated the art of Marina Abramović before it began.

It is not just that Marina Abramović in one of the possible endings would have been killed physically. The other possible ending would have been just as disastrous to her art. We can see that if we go few thousand years back to the Greek philosopher Aristotle. In his treatise on tragedy he defined the ultimate purpose of this art “through pity and fear to accomplish cleaning (Greek: katharsis)”. By living through pity and fear the spectator is cleansed from such emotions according to Aristotle. Art imitates actions to provoke an emotional response that produces mental cleaning, he claims. Marina Abramović shares this ancient aspiration of art but achieves it in a radical way. To her, art is not a matter of imitation. She does not imitate actions to produce cleaning. She does not imitate anything. Her art is life and death. She tells us:

“I love bad jokes. I love to enjoy everything. Then comes this moment to work – and it becomes a question of life or death.”

In her art Marina Abramović offers her actual life and death. She presents the public with her real pain, passion, and presence. This evokes an authentic emotional engagement that accomplishes a genuine cleaning of the mind. Her performances fulfil the Aristotelian purpose of art.

So taken together the two untitled and unperformed performances contain the very essence and the ultimate end of Marina Abramović’ performance art: Cleaning by life and death. One might say: They are the ultimate end of art.

Therefore, they are the origin of her work and at the same time the end of her

work. Had she performed them, she could not have performed anything else. In either of the two possible endings, she would have been killed, as her life in art would have been completed. It would have been the death of Marina Abramović as we know her – even before we got to know her.

Instead of the two ultimate performances we have a lifetime of original performance art, or one might say: a lifetime of reenactments of the two original, but unperformed performances in order to accomplish what they should have accomplished: Cleaning by life and death.

Luckily, the gallery rejected the proposals, and we can celebrate Marina Abramović' performance art, that is her life and death, and the cleaning it produces.

It is a great honor to put our praise into words.

It is also a great challenge. Not just because I am not an artist, nor an art historian, I am a theologian, and more importantly a fan, but also because it is impossible to talk about performance art. Performance art should be experienced. It should not be talked about.

But I am here, and I have to talk and sometimes you have to talk about things that you cannot talk about. And when you have to talk about things that you

cannot talk about, the only thing you can do is to talk about yourself in relation to the things that you cannot talk about. A great German theologian said that in the middle of the 20th century. He was, however, talking about talking about God. Without talking about similarity, it goes for Marina Abramović and her performance art. To talk about them means to talk about oneself in relation to them. So, I will use this occasion to talk about myself and what I think, you may say overthink, about Marina Abramović' art. So, the following is my personal understanding of the performance art of Marina Abramović, my interpretation of her life and death, and my impression of her pain, passion, and presence.

## Pain

In the early seventies, Marina Abramović developed her specific kind of performance art. She tells about this period:

“When I was in Yugoslavia, I was always thinking that art was a kind of question between life and death, and some of my performances really included the possibility of dying, you know, during the piece; it could happen.”

Along with the risk of death, pain was an integrated part of these performances. Marina Abramović would cut herself with knives in a bloody soldiers' game.

She would put herself in the middle of a burning five-pointed star and lose consciousness from lack of oxygen. She would take in so much air from an air blower that she fainted. And in the piece *Art Must Be Beautiful, Artist Must Be Beautiful*, which was performed at Charlottenburg here in Copenhagen, she would brush and comb her hair so violently that her head and face would bleed.

This piece is not only a comment on conventional understandings of art and conventional ideas of artists' relation to their art. In this way, I think, it is a critical remark to John Keats' idealistic definition "beauty is truth, truth beauty". Marina Abramović exposes the violence that is an underlying precondition for such traditional concepts of art and beauty. In the context of the first and enormously important women's exhibition in Denmark, she of course addresses this violence in terms of gender. It is female violent pain that is suppressed classical male art.

But I also wonder whether the close relation between art and artist in the title is a reference to Marina Abramović' own art in which there is no sharp difference between artist and art. Not because both art and artist are beautiful, but because art is life and death whether it is beautiful or not. And her art goes to the limits of life and death as painful as it may be.

She tells about these works:

"What I was interested in, was experiencing the physical and mental limits of the human body and mind. I wanted to experience these limits together with

the public. I could never do this alone. I always need the public to look at me because [this] creates an energy dialogue. You can get an enormous amount of energy from the public to cross your physical and mental limits.”

Pain is not important for its own sake. What is important is the connection that the pain of the artist creates to the public. Her pain makes the public respond emotionally. Aristotle said by pity and fear, but it is more than that. The public and the artist create a common energy that enables the art. Marina Abramović reports this experience after her first performance *Rhythm 10* in 1973:

“I was drunk from the overwhelming energy that I'd received. That was the moment I knew that I had found my medium. No painting, no object that I could make, could ever give me that kind of feeling, and it was a feeling I knew I would have to seek out, again and again and again.”

As I understand it, this has another level. The common energy, the energy dialogue, emerges from the fact that humans are connected in their common vulnerability. We encounter our own possibility of being hurt when we see someone else in pain. We experience the limits of our own lives when we see someone else cross her limits. We meet our own fear of death when we see someone else confront her own death. This unites us in a human community. But it is, of course, a fragile community.

Marina Abramović exposes this the following year in *Rhythm 0*, one of her best-known works, where she makes herself a passive object by taking responsibility for her own life and death. She thereby forces the public to

become active subjects and take responsibility for her vulnerability. During six hours the public could do whatever, they wanted to her with the 72 objects she had laid out for them, notoriously including a gun and a bullet. The result may have surprised the public. Tellingly, they could not look the artist in the eye after the performance, embarrassed that the common human vulnerability so easily turned into encroachment and exploitation.

But this is not always the case. In *Thomas Lips* (later anglicized as *Lips of Thomas*) Marina Abramović starts off on a divine diet of one kilo of honey and one liter of wine before she breaks the wineglass. She then cuts the five-pointed communist star on her lower abdomen with a razor blade and whips herself until she feels no pain. Finally, she lies down on a cross of ice with a heater above her to keep the cut star bleeding. She stays there for 30 minutes until people from the audience carries her away.

In this piece Marina Abramović performs a kind of shamanistic ritual in which she overtakes a collective trauma by incising it in her own flesh. She then purifies herself through the old religious means of self-flagellation to use the pain as a door into another state of mind when she in the end sacrifices herself on the freezing cross. The public saves her from her self-sacrifice in an act of mercy. Perhaps because they have been cleaned through energy of Marina Abramović' life and death in pain.

Passion



That same year, 1975, Marina Abramović meets the German artist Ulay. They begin an artistic and personal relationship. In their work, they perform the life and death of a couple. In one series, called Relation Work, they explore gender, body, power and passion. These relation works are known to be very violent. The couple takes turns to slap each other in the face. They scream at each other until they lose their voices. And they run naked towards each other and collide with strong force. But I don't think violence is the topic of Relation Work. If the works are violent, it is only because love is violent.

One of the, in my opinion, most profound Relation Works is called Balance Proof. Marina Abramović and Ulay stand naked in front of each other holding a double-sided mirror between their bodies. At one point, after half an hour, they walk away. The mirror falls to the ground and miraculously does not break.

This piece invites sophisticated psychoanalytical interpretations about the mirror stage and the formation of a split self, but to me it is a realistic representation of the philosopher Hegel's romantic definition of love: "Sein Selbst in einem Anderen haben" (to have one's self in another). The other holds up the picture you have of yourself so that this other is just as important for your self-understanding as yourself. This is to have one's self in the other. But artwork is not just illustrations of philosophical definitions. The artistic representation in Balance Proof exposes how the narcissistic danger is closely related to, even integrated into this understanding of love: You may think that you see the face of the other when you actually see a reflection of yourself. Perhaps this is a danger not just in the definition of love but in love itself. Balance is proof of the relation.

During the performance *Night Sea Crossing* the relation between Marina Abramović and Ulay fell apart. In 90 non-consecutive days they sat in front of each other trying to cross the night sea of the subconscious. At one point they could not continue together.

But art went on and their relation came to a spectacular end in the performance *Walking the Great Wall*. The two of them started from each end of the Great Wall of China and after weeks of walking, they met in the middle and separated.

Originally the walk on the Great Wall was titled *The Lovers* but it eventually and for obvious reasons was given a more descriptive name. The title, however, reappeared in Marina Abramović' first solo exhibition after the separation as the name for a sculptural representation of the performance *Relation in Time*.

Let me just mention briefly that I personally, being a bit of a romantic, include Ulay's appearance at the MoMA performance in 2010 and the film *No Predicted End* among the *Relation Work*. In my own mental archive, I even file their financial struggles and legal lawsuits among the relation work. Hence making it into the longest of Marina Abramović' long durational works and one of the great stories of passion in life and death.

Then Marina Abramović tells us:

“After walking the Chinese Wall, I realized that for the first time I had been doing a performance where the audience was not physically present. In order to transmit this experience to them I built a series of transitory objects with the idea that the audience could actively take part.”

The title Transitory Objects reminds me of developmental psychology in which a transitional object is a thing that a child uses to facilitate the transition from one psychological phase to the next. As the walk on the Chinese wall was a transitory journey from one personal and artistic identity to another so Marina Abramović’ transitory objects should help the spectator to transcend their own present situation. By interacting with and receiving energy from the crystals that are incorporated into these works of art, the audience will be able to transform their own inner self.

In 2021 Marina Abramović built a Crystal Wall of Crying as a remote extension of the Wailing Wall in Jerusalem to commemorate the Jewish victims of one of the biggest massacres during the Second World War. It is supposed to be a wall of healing in which the actively participating public gains energy to heal traumas and reconcile conflicts. When it was officially unveiled, the artist said:

“I want to create the image that is transcendental about any war at any time at any place.”

The wall is located at Babyn Yar, Ukraine.

Last year this was surprisingly relevant. This year it is shockingly more relevant to transform the Wailing Wall in Jerusalem into an artwork that transcends time and place and includes both sides of all conflicts. If it could even transcend the notion of victim – perpetrator it might just create hope that healing and reconciliation – cleaning of conflicts – is possible.

This is the purpose of Marina Abramović' masterpiece Balkan Baroque from the late nineties. In the act of cleaning, it transcends a specific historical situation to comment on any act of aggression.

The piece is the culmination of several performances and video installations from the nineties when Marina Abramović worked solo and returned to her original motif of cleaning by life and death. In the series *Cleaning the Mirror*, which is a Buddhist expression for preparing to die while living, she first washed a model of her own skeleton. Secondly, she gave life to the skeleton when it was attached to her body and moved according to her breathing. And thirdly, she absorbed energy from ancient funeral objects and other remains of traditional death rituals.

The very material presence of death in these and other cleaning works has at first an individual perspective. By cleaning the mirror, or cleaning the house, Marina Abramović prepares for the reality of own death by physically incorporating it into her body. But by being confronted with death in this realistic manner the spectators will confront their own death and be included

into the cleaning process and clean their own mirror.

Technically, these cleaning performances prepared for Balkan Baroque. But this work surpasses individuality and addresses life and death in general, as it on the one hand refers to the atrocities of the Balkan war, and on the other hand transcends this war to comment on any war. Or maybe it is more accurate to say that Marina Abramović through sense perception let the individual perspective of the spectator meet the experience of collective death.

The piece was conceived for the Biennale in Venice but for political reasons it was not performed in one of the prestigious pavilions but in a humble basement. It consisted of a triptych of video projections with Marina Abramović' father and mother on each side telling stories from their partisan past. In the middle the artist herself, dressed as Dr. Abramović, who tells the Serbian story of how to raise a scarry and murderous wolf rat. In front of this were three coffin-like copper sinks and a pile of 1500 fresh beef bones on top of which Marina Abramović sat for four days and six hours cleaning the bones and singing Serbian folk songs.

Perhaps by accident smell was a main factor in the work. In the warm basement with poor air-conditioning the meat on the bones began to rot, so that the public was met with smell of death already when they entered the piece. Even through the documentary material this combination of old-time war stories, a grotesque story about killing rats, and the artist as a Sisyphus figure on the top of a mountain, cleaning the death of the rotting bones comes across as a unique representation of the trauma of war and the ensuing processes cleaning.

Marina Abramović deservedly won the Golden Lion.

Presence

Later that same year she announces:

“Art in the future will be absolutely without objects.”

This means that presence will be the only content of art. To be present in the presence is what art is all about. Or art is in the moment. Or art is simply the Moment as Søren Kierkegaard, our local and slightly overrated philosopher might have said. He defines the Moment as that

“whereby time constantly intersects eternity and eternity constantly pervades time.”

The ultimate piece of art is just this Moment. It is pure presence. Art is when  
The Artist Is Present.

Marina Abramović offered her presence to the public for a total of 716 hours and thirty minutes. Just as the ancient priestess Pythia in the temple of Delphi, she sat on a chair and made herself available to anybody seeking her council. And as the inscription on the temple in Delphi was “know thyself”, so the present artist provoked the persons that were present with her to know themselves. She tells:

“... very soon while you’re having this gaze and looking at me, you start having this invert and you start looking at yourself. So I am just a trigger, I am just a mirror and actually they become aware of their own life, of their own vulnerability, of their own pain, of everything – and that brings the crying. [They are] really crying about their own self, and that is an extremely emotional moment.”

Presence itself brings the mental and emotional cleaning that is the very purpose of Marina Abramović’ art. The piece has been unforgettably documented by the photographer Marco Anelli, who took pictures of the 1545 faces in front of Marina Abramović. When I look at these portraits, I have no doubt that they demonstrate the theological idea that the ethical demand to preserve the precarious life of the other arises from two human faces meeting. The piece of art itself creates this primordial scene of two present human beings from which the acceptance of the other as a human being arises. Humanity itself arises when the artist is present.

At this point, however, it is no longer clear whose presence it is. The presence is the presence of two persons. Marina Abramović could not make this artwork alone. She is completely dependent on the person in front of her. It even becomes a question who the artist is that is present. Is it Marina Abramović or the person sitting with her? Or does the artist Marina Abramović make the other person an artist by her presence?

This is what she does in her Abramović Method , when she in a new genre of performance work trains the public in cleaning their own mental or spiritual house. They become artists themselves when they are cleaned and become able to be present in the Moment.

And let me for a moment return shortly to our popular countryman Søren Kierkegaard who used to promenade the streets around here. He or one of his pseudonyms preferred Mozart's Don Juan above all other art in the world. It is, he claimed, the ultimate piece of art because it represents the most abstract idea, sensuality, in the most abstract medium, music. But he was not quite right. No idea can be more abstract than presence, and no medium can be more abstract than presence. So if Danes understood their pet philosopher, they should celebrate the performance art of Marina Abramović as the ultimate form of art.

We do that today. We honor and praise Marina Abramović because she has offered her pain, passion, and presence for our sake. She has sacrificed her life and death to make us clean. What will happen next? Perhaps she will be resurrected in another reality, a mixed reality, as she has been by the present Todd Eckert in a project properly named The Life. A life without death.



But I wonder if we can do without the death of Marina Abramović. Her art is her life and death. We need the energy from her life when death is a real possibility. Life is not enough as death is not enough. A year ago, we feared that we should no longer have both the life and death of Marina Abramović. We were afraid that death would no longer be a possibility in her life but a fact of her life. Luckily, that was not the case. Marina Abramović is still present in life and death. For that we are thankful, as we as we are thankful to the gallery in Belgrade that refused to let her perform and gave us the presence of her life and death to accomplish cleaning.

For that you deserve to win the Sonning Prize. Congratulations.

And thank you. Thank you for your presence – and thank you all for your attention.

**Kilde**

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