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**The Meaning of the Touch:**  
**Early Relation Work of Marina Abramovic and Ulay**  
A Thesis Presented  
by  
**Kirsten Dianne Iverson**  
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Abstract of the Thesis

**The Meaning of the Touch:**

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by

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**Master of Arts**

in

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This thesis explores the meaning of the touch as exhibited by the collaborative performances of artists Marina Abramovic and Ulay. It begins with an introduction of the pieces that will be discussed in the following chapters and a brief history of the artist's relationship. The first chapter then continues with a discussion the nature of the touch. The theories of Maurice Merleau-Ponty provide the foundation of this chapter, especially his concept of the chiasmatic encounter. The second chapter explores the darker side of Abramovic and Ulay's performances with an examination of masochism. It begins with an investigation of the history of the word "masochism" using Gilles Deleuze's reading of Theodore Reik's psychological study entitled "Masochism in Modern Man." Using Deleuze's concepts taken from *Coldness and Cruelty* the masochistic label applied to Abramovic and Ulay's performances is questioned. The third chapter concentrates on principles put forth by performance art theorists and also returns to the philosophy of Merleau-Ponty. It provides a conclusion to this thesis by addressing the role of the spectator in Abramovic and Ulay's pieces.

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## Introduction

What is the meaning of a touch in performance art? What does physical interaction tell spectators about the performer's intentions as to the meaning of a piece? Can it show the artist something new about himself? Furthermore, if the spectator is to derive meaning from physical interaction in a performance does it matter if he does not touch the artists, or can two artists touching similarly reveal their intended outcome without coming into contact with the spectator? Because the skin's surface is the largest communicative organ of our body, touch is arguably the most effective and versatile sense to convey meaning. This skin makes up the limits of our bodies; it encloses and contains everything else that makes up our bodies. Therefore it becomes the most relatable part of the body because it is what we use to interact with others.

This thesis argues that the 1970s collaborative performances of Marina Abramovic (b. 1946) and Uwe Laysiepen (b. 1943) were among the most effective in creating a situation that allowed both the artists themselves and the audience to have alternative experiences. Laysiepen took on the pseudonym "Ulay" early on in his artistic career and therefore will be referred to as Ulay from this point forward. These alternative experiences forced each party to take an introspective look at their own nature, which was what Ulay and Abramovic sought to produce in their performances. The effectiveness of these pieces comes from the artists' use of his and her body. More specifically, the pieces' success began with their use of a style of touching that the audience could relate to – familiar touching in ways many people have experienced.

Since this thesis takes a theoretical approach to this question of the touch, the informed assumptions of the artist's intentions are based on the readings of several texts and the viewing of documentary film and photographic stills. The author was not present for any of the following described performances and so the experience of Ulay and Abramovic's performances has been mediated by other's understanding of their pieces.

Ulay and Abramovic took a strict position on the nature of documentation. The problematic aspect of documentation in performance art is that it often is mistaken as the actual act itself and not merely a record of its occurrence. This is troublesome for performance artists who did not want to create commodities, who did not want to create something that could be bought and sold in the art market. For Ulay and Abramovic documentation was necessary in order that the piece remain in history. It became a document of the event. Even so, the photo still or documentary film cannot substitute for the performance itself. Documentation, Ulay said, "...cannot replace the work itself. The documentation, be it a photograph, video or film, cannot substitute for the actual performance. It simply cannot, because the performance happens in a social context. You become part of the action as you witness it. This experience cannot be substituted by any media."<sup>1</sup>

The performance was necessarily ephemeral – it only existed in the moment of its production and therefore the still or film cannot be taken as the performance itself. However, not being present for the performances is not problematic if the means of documentation are thought of as historical record rather than the

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<sup>1</sup> Endnotes for the introduction can be found on pages 61-62.

performance in itself. To quote Amelia Jones, “while the experience of viewing a photograph and reading a text is clearly different from that of sitting in a small room watching an artist perform, neither has a privileged relationship to the historical ‘truth’ of the performance.”<sup>ii</sup> The interaction between the audience and the performer should not be given any precedent over the interaction between the “viewer/reader” and the documentation, says Jones.<sup>iii</sup>

Abramovic and Ulay share the same November 30 birthday: Abramovic was born in Communist Yugoslavia in 1946 and Ulay in Nazi Germany three years earlier. In 1975 the two met in Amsterdam on their mutual birthday, starting a twelve-year relationship that was both artistic and personal. It was not until 1976 that they first performed together. Yet, their tendency towards pushing physical and social boundaries was present in each artists’ art before their collaboration. Before meeting, both artists explored intensely dangerous situations. These performances happened in the early 1970’s when Fluxus and the Happenings were taking place in Europe, blurring the distinction between art and life.<sup>2</sup> The solo performances of Ulay and Abramovic followed in this vein heavily influenced by both movements, melding their private and artistic lives, the one influencing the other.

The pieces Abramovic performed while living in Yugoslavia before meeting Ulay tested the limits of her body, physically and mentally. She felt she had to completely surrender any power over the outcome of the piece by relinquishing all

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<sup>2</sup> In fact, Abramovic participated in a 1975 Hermann Nitsch performance in Prinzenorf, Austria. Marina Abramovic, *Artist Body: Performances 1969-1998* (Milan: Edizioni Charta, 1998), 15.



control while performing in order to truly test her limits. In the 1974 performance of *Rhythm 5* at the *Studenski Kulturni Centar*, after lighting on fire a large star composed of gasoline-soaked woodchips, cutting off her hair, fingernails and toenails, and throwing those expendable parts of her body into the fire, she laid down in the middle of the burning star. After the fire had consumed all of the oxygen in the middle of the star she passed out. Because she was lying down, the audience did not realize she had lost consciousness until she did not react when her pant leg caught on fire. Two audience members – including a doctor – intervened in the performance and carried her out of the burning environment she had made for herself. It was because of this performance and the audience's reaction to it that she decided continue to test the limits of her body but in a way that the audience could not intercede.<sup>iv</sup> In the following performances she attempted to keep the audience ignorant of her endangered situation. In *Rhythm 4* (1974) the spectator watched a closed-circuit television monitor showing what appeared to be Abramovic's head submerged under water. During what might be called a live video performance, she put her face closer and closer to the opening of an active industrial fan. Because of the high pressure blowing out of fan and the resultant lack of oxygen, she lost consciousness – a fact that remained unknown to the audience. The performance lasted an additional three minutes after she passed out without the audience ever being aware of her situation.<sup>v</sup> In another performance, *Rhythm 0* (1974), she gave the audience complete control over her body and even her life. For six hours in the Modern Gallery in Slovenia, she herself became an object along with seventy-two other items, and allowed the audience to exploit her as they pleased without fear of

consequence. Alongside the seventy-two items, which included a scissors, a knife, a gun and a single bullet, was a note written by Abramovic taking full responsibility for what might transpire between the hours of 8:00 pm to 2:00 am.<sup>vi</sup> Those in attendance – both art connoisseurs and people brought into the gallery from the street – sliced her skin, stuck thorny roses into her palm, and pointed the now loaded gun at her head. At this point a group of the connoisseurs created a physical barrier with their bodies around the now nearly nude artist in order to protect her from the escalating violence. In an interview with Thomas McEvilly, she stated that if she had continued to pursue her physical limits in this manner she would have eventually killed herself. Then, she says, she met Ulay, insinuating to her long-time friend McEvilly that it was Ulay who saved her life.<sup>vii</sup>

The dangerous situations in which the German-born Ulay put himself were of a political nature. In 1976, for a performance entitled *There is a Criminal Contact in Art*, Ulay stole Hitler's favorite painting, Carl Spitzweg's *Der Arme Poete* (The Poor Poet), from the *Neue Nationalgalerie* (New National Gallery) and hung it in an apartment rented by a Turkish immigrant family.<sup>viii</sup> When he was eventually caught he was given the choice of paying a fine or going to jail. Instead he fled Germany, only to be arrested during a layover in the Munich airport two years later.<sup>ix</sup> This act was intended for a wider audience than Abramovic's afore mentioned performances. He put himself in danger not only to gain the interest of the art community but society at large.

The in-between or liminal is a reoccurring theme in the works of Ulay and Abramovic. Anna Novakov points out that “[t]hey were interested in the idea of

displacement, including their own lack of fixed address.”<sup>x</sup> When they first met, Abramovic was still living in Yugoslavia and Ulay in Germany. When they decided to move in together they chose Amsterdam, as it was a central location to which neither of them had ties. For the next few years they lived in a Citroen van, constantly moving from place to place.<sup>xi</sup> “We decided to be very mobile,” Ulay told Heidi Grundmann in a 1978 interview, “...it has to do with the interiority achieved by permanent motion.”<sup>xii</sup> For the artists this was a way to always remain aware of their limits not only as artists but also as human beings. Through living in a constant state of instability they were able to immerse themselves in this liminal state. In order to experience this alternate state they sought inspiration from non-Western cultures. Abramovic mentions, “I saw that all these cultures pushed the body to physical extreme in order to make a mental jump, to eliminate the fear of death, the fear of pain, and of all the body limitations we live with...Performance was the form enabling me to jump to that other space and dimension.”<sup>xiii</sup>

The first chapter takes a philosophical approach to the meaning of touch as exemplified by Abramovic and Ulay’s performances. Performance art has often been closely scrutinized through a psychoanalytic lens and therefore a different method to the study of the couple’s performances will be employed. Occasionally it is necessary to mention points made through means of psychoanalysis, and while some non-psychoanalytic ideas from authors whose approach is normally deemed highly psychoanalytic are used, a full-fledged psychoanalytic investigation is avoided. Instead, the topic is addressed through the philosophical writings of

Maurice Merleau-Ponty, and Jacques Derrida in order to gain new insight into Ulay and Abramovic's early pieces.

Touch is inextricable from the body's awareness of the world. In modern western culture the sense of touch is not traditionally considered the primary communicative sense, which is generally left to sight and, to a lesser degree, hearing. Touching objects in the world and moving in relation to those objects gives us a more complete way of experiencing, learning about, and knowing the world around us.<sup>xiv</sup> This thesis concentrates on the experience of touch, but because it deals with the human body's experience, and not some abstract notion of 'touch,' other senses must enter the equation.

According to Maurice Merleau-Ponty we have an understanding of the significance of the other's physical feelings but do not have the ability to actually and sensually feel what the other feels.<sup>xv</sup> Touch is how we receive information about the world around us, but also how we communicate to others in the world. As mentioned above, the skin's surface is the largest communicative organ of our body and touch – the sense most associated with the skin – is arguably the most effective and versatile interaction to convey subjective meaning to others in an embodied way. The word "embodied" is used to connote a lived experience, one that the body feels without needing to analyze the sensation. In addition, because the skin is the most apparent part of our body it becomes the site of mutual understanding through a phenomenological, and mutual relation. It becomes the place where we understand and relate to the other. In other words, it can be assumed that because I can understand the other's senses the other can understand mine. We can

understand the violence of Abramovic's early projects because we know that in *Rhythm 5*, for example, when she is inside of the burning star it is hot and most likely painful for her because we all have had personal contact with fire, its heat, and the pain it can cause.

In his first major publication, *Phenomenology of Perception*, Merleau-Ponty defines movement as how we find ourselves in the world. In this thesis, Merleau-Ponty's ideas concerning movement are expanded to include the act of touching. Taking from Merleau-Ponty's ideas the argument of this thesis hinges on a key term: the *directed* touch. The first chapter continues to define more accurately what is meant by the directed touch and how it is important in this discussion of Abramovic and Ulay. The directed touch is an intentional touch, specifically targeted for a certain recipient, whether object or person, and is able to carry the meaning of the interaction. Due to the pre-meditated nature of the artist's performances, the unintentional touch does not have any importance in this thesis. The unintentional physical encounter may be meaningless to the toucher and therefore does not communicate any intended meaning, but to the recipient the unintentional touch can be very meaningful. That is, a reaction the toucher cannot be pre-meditate and therefore is not significant to the argument in this thesis. The meaning becomes assumed, the touched person then attributes his assumed meaning to the touch. Furthermore, the directed touch used by Abramovic and Ulay usually does not actually touch an observer. Therefore I am in a sympathetic relationship with the audience because I have been in a similar situation as they – watching action unfold before their eyes. Additionally, the audience members are in a sympathetic

relationship with the artists, and therefore I am able to understand the significance of the artist's touch and can relate it back to my own experiences. Thus my experiences are mediated by the lapse of time and the different types of documentation necessary to take on a project such as this. Inserting the audience into the arrangement complicates matters because it brings a third dimension to the role of the touch. Because of the complications associated with the audience, the discussion of their interaction with the artists will be postponed to the final chapter.

Ulay and Abramovic use directed touch and their bodies to bring socially ingrained dichotomies to light. These dichotomies include the always-present male and female, but this chapter concentrates on active versus passive situations, and objective versus subjective relationships corresponding to normally attributed gender roles. Often the performances of Ulay and Abramovic were violent and done in the nude, creating a situation that was highly sexualized and titillating yet simultaneously repulsive. The performance *Relation in Space* most clearly demonstrates this final issue of the first chapter. *Relation in Space*, the first performance they performed as a couple, was executed at the 1976 Venice Biennale. For fifty-eight minutes the two artists' naked bodies collided with each other. Like many of their pieces, it started out slowly but as time went on their speed escalated. At first they simply walked towards each other and bumped, shoulder-to-shoulder, and continued walking forward. By the ending moments of the performance they were running at each other, at full sprinting speed and smashing into and bouncing off of each other.<sup>xvi</sup>

The second chapter addresses the issue of masochism as an extension of the previous chapter's discussion of the sexual violence in their dichotomous relationship. The collaborative efforts of Ulay and Abramovic have been labeled as masochistic because of the self-inflicted violence in their performances. This chapter expands upon this idea and the questionable definition of masochism, which has changed considerably since its first inception. It has become a household term labeling anything that might be considered self-destructive or self-debasing. Here the arguments are based on Gilles Deleuze's readings of Theodore Reik and Leopold von Sacher-Masoch, the namesake of 'masochism' as designated by the psychoanalysis of Richard von Krafft-Ebing in his 1886 book *Psychopathia Sexualis*. In *Coldness and Cruelty*, Deleuze recounts Reik's four characteristics of masochism: suspense, fantasy, provocation, and demonstration, adding a fifth characteristic: the contract.<sup>xvii</sup> While all five characteristics are pertinent to the study of performance art, the second chapter concentrates on the idea that an unwritten contract between the spectator and performers is inherent in all performances and discusses the idea of the contract between Ulay and Abramovic more specifically. In *Expansion in Space*, Abramovic clearly demonstrates this unspoken contract between herself and the audience that is inherent in the masochistic act. In the performance performed in June of 1977 at the *Documenta VI* festival in Kassel, Germany, the couple, standing back to back and facing two monumental pillars, repeatedly threw themselves at said pillars. Today through either the supplemental text or from watching the documentary video we become aware that the pillars are mobile and are two-times heavier than the performers' body weight.<sup>xviii</sup> As Ulay and Abramovic described it in

later books they published together, the performance was supposed to stop once the movable pillars had abutted the stationary pillars on the opposite side of the artists. Ulay's stopped first and he calmly walked out of the performance area. But, because she was ignorant to the fact that her column had also reached its final resting spot, Abramovic continued to throw her body against the column for an additional thirty minutes after Ulay had left. Acting alone, literally banging her head (and body) against the wall, she kept the audience in a suspended state of fascination precisely because she no longer produced any movement but continued despite. Additionally she addresses the contract between she and Ulay. Per their agreement, she would not stop until the pillar stationed itself against the immobile column. Finally, the second chapter continues to read masochism in a more positive light through Anita Phillips' book, *A Defense of Masochism*. Phillips sees masochism as a way to strengthen the attachment within a relationship, rather than the rupture of sexual ideals that is most commonly associated with masochism.

The final chapter addresses the responsibility of the audience; here the argument returns to Merleau-Ponty and his thoughts on reflexivity and address the sympathetic yet reflexive relationship that is forced upon the audience in pieces such as *Light/Dark* and, in a different way, *Imponderabilia*. In the famous chapter from *The Visible and the Invisible*, "The Intertwining – The Chiasm," Merleau-Ponty investigates the nature of the relationship between the sense of touch and of sight. "Visibility" and the "flesh" are that which exists between the seer and the seen and between the toucher and the touched.<sup>xix</sup> The relationship between the spectator and



performer is found in this mutual and reflexive dependence on the other. This idea will be expanded upon in the third and final chapter.

Ulay and Abramovic communicate meaning to the audience and provide them with the medium for an alternative experience through their use of the (masochistic) touch. The discussion of masochism from the previous chapter will continue with a more specific discussion of the relationship between the audience and the artists. While she supports the use of masochism in performance art, theorist Kathy O'Dell is still inclined to ask why someone would do such a thing. She gives five reasons, but the most important to this paper are: in order to be "both a human subject and an object," and to highlight "the relationship between artist and audience."<sup>xx</sup> The final chapter focuses on Ulay and Abramovic's collaborative pieces in which violence is most obviously present. Although these pieces do not represent their varied repertoire as a whole, they are, in the opinion of the author, the most effective pieces in their body of work as they put the artists into situations to which the spectator can relate. Through these familiar settings, the audience member was able to sympathize with the performers. This chapter is concerned with the touching between the artists, and the significance of such, with the additional concern of how said touch affects those watching the couple.

There is a two-fold paradox that happens when Abramovic and Ulay perform pieces of ever-increasing violence. The audience is put into a situation in which they watch two bodies pummel each other but do not attempt to help them. Perhaps they do not feel that they can or are supposed to help the artists. Perhaps the audience members have completely distanced themselves mentally from the artists,

since the artists are completely physically removed, or, alternatively, have become fully objectified by the spectator. If the latter is true, it is questionable whether the audience is responsible for the welfare of the artists since the performers have physically distanced themselves. Conversely, the two artists knowingly put the audience members into this situation and assume that they – the audience – will not interfere with the performance, testing the limits to which the audience will let them injure themselves; the responsibility is not only on the side of the audience but also on the side of the artists.

In their collaborative pieces, Ulay and Abramovic forced the audience into a relationship in which those watching felt sympathy for the performers. This happens in many of their pieces, but most notably in *Breathing In/ Breathing Out*, *Breathing Out/ Breathing In*, and *Light/Dark*. In *Breathing In/ Breathing Out*, performed at the *Studenski Kulturni Centar* in Belgrade in April of 1977, the pair locked lips, sealed their nostrils with their fingers, and breathed in and out, the same air, for nineteen minutes. This performance was slightly different from its conceptual brother, *Breathing Out/ Breathing In* (1978). In the latter, performed in the following March at the Stedelijk Museum in Amsterdam, Ulay let the air out of his lungs before they sealed off their air supply while in the former he started with his lungs full of a fresh supply of oxygen. Consequently, *Breathing Out/ Breathing In* only lasted fifteen minutes because the two did not start with a fresh supply of air.<sup>xxi</sup> As a part of both performances, they taped microphones to their throats in order to amplify the sound of them choking on their own breath. In the video documentation of *Breathing In/Breathing Out* one can visibly and aurally sense the distress between

the two while the oxygen supply slowly diminished and they break apart violently gasping for fresh air.

In October of 1977, at the *Internationale Kunstmesse* in Cologne, Germany, the couple performed what the author considers to be their most effective piece. *Light/Dark* embodies many of the issues addressed in this paper. In the piece, the two sat on the floor with bright spotlights shining in their faces. By shining the light straight into their faces, they drew attention to their vision by means of impeding it and therefore diminishing it. Instead, the audience was compelled to focus their attention on the artists' actions. They were clothed in simple white t-shirt and jeans. Both of their hair was tied up in buns resulting in a remarkably similar look that drew attention away from the distinctions between themselves. They described the piece, "[a]lternately, we slap each other's face until one of us stops."<sup>xxii</sup> It was a rhythmic slap. Ulay's right hand moved to Abramovic's left cheek and returned to his thigh. Abramovic's right hand moved to Ulay's left cheek and returned to her thigh. This action continued for twenty minutes as the slapping became faster and harder until Abramovic ducked to avoid Ulay's slap.<sup>xxiii</sup> The performance actively forced the spectator into a sympathetic relationship by the mere simplicity of the setting and repetitiveness of the action. The final chapter argues that because slapping is something we can all relate to – whether from personal experience as either the one who slaps or the slapped – the audience is pulled into the piece, conceptually replacing their bodies with the artist's.

The performance *Imponderabilia*, performed in June of 1977 entailed the two artists standing face to face in the doorway of the *Galleria Comunale d'Arte*

*Moderna* in Bologna leaving only a small space between them – naked. The audience members were forced to choose whether they would enter the gallery at all, and then which sexed body they would face as they slid sideways through the constricted opening.<sup>xxiv</sup> After the spectators had pushed their way through the naked artists they were met with a video image of themselves on the opposite wall – video taken while they, often uncomfortably, slid past the artists. On that same wall was written; “[s]uch imponderable human factors as one’s aesthetic sensitivity the overriding importance of imponderables in determining human conduct.”<sup>xxv</sup> Here Ulay and Abramovic bring attention to the fact that people act differently in aesthetic situations (galleries, museums, concert halls, etc.) than they would in a normal, public situation and asks their audience to question why that is. The performance was designed to keep Ulay and Abramovic in that doorway for three hours, but the couple was forced by the police to stop after only an hour and a half. One ‘participant’ commented, “[e]ven for the sexually liberated the situation created acute awareness of social mores and their (lingering) effect on psychological response.”<sup>xxvi</sup> Yet, even though the artists came into physical contact with their audience in this performance, they are mentally removed as ever. They do not greet the people who are inconvenienced by their presence. Instead they look off into space, completely removed from those around them. Here was a piece where the audience comes into physical contact with the artists and is forced to confront the relationship between artist and spectator directly yet there is no response from the artists. There is a reflexive, directed touch between the artists and the participant, destroying the usual barrier between the observing and the observed. Written into

the piece is the artist's intent to touch the spectator. The spectator, however, did not come into the situation with an intention to make any physical contact with the artists and was probably surprised and unsure what to do with these naked artists inhibiting his way into their gallery and show.

In 1988 their personal and professional relationships dissolved. Since then Abramovic has lead a fairly successful artistic career, re-establishing her notoriety most recently in 2005 when she performed a series at the New York Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum entitled *Seven Easy Pieces*. During the exhibition Abramovic re-performed six well-known performances originally from the founding years of performance and body art, including one of her own.<sup>3</sup> The seventh performance was a new piece created specifically for the Guggenheim exhibition. Additionally, her 2001 performance and reaction to the atrocities of September eleventh of that year, *The House With the Ocean View* performed at the Sean Kelly Gallery in New York City, was featured on the popular HBO series, *Sex and the City*. This shows that she is not only successful within the confines of the art world but extends into popular culture as well.

Ulay did not end up attaining such recognition, neither from the art world nor through popular media, and thus the information on Abramovic greatly overwhelms the information on Ulay. After they parted ways he continued to travel

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<sup>3</sup> These performances included Bruce Nauman's *Body Pressure* (1974), Vito Acconci's *Seedbed* (1972), Valie Export's *Action Pants: Genital Panic* (1969), Gina Pane's *The Conditioning* from her three-part series entitled *Self-Portraits* (1973), Joseph Beuys' *How to Explain Pictures to a Dead Hare Joseph Beuys... Any Old Moose...* (1965), Marina Abramovic's *Lips of Thomas* (1975), and Marina Abramovic *Entering the Other Side* (2005). For more information see <[seveneasypieces.com](http://seveneasypieces.com)>.

around the world, working with photography, and finally settled down as the professor for new media art at the National University in Karlsruhe, Germany where he remains today.<sup>xxvii</sup>

As this thesis proceeds it will move from a discussion of our subjective experience with the world to a more comprehensive discourse on the interactions between the subjective and the world around us. The first chapter begins with self-touching then addresses touching another. The second chapter expands upon the first when dealing with the concept of touching the other violently. The final chapter expands upon these ideas further by concentrating on the interaction between the audience and Ulay and Abramovic. Although this thesis is centered around the concept of touch and the idea that through touch humans can communicate states of mind that may not be able to be communicated through any other medium – such as spoken or written language – it will be necessary to include the sense of sight in the last chapter when dealing with the audience’s interactions with the artists.

## Chapter 1: Theory of the Touch

In order to understand the meaning of the act of touching in Marina Abramovic and Ulay's performances, we must first understand the nature of touching itself. After reflecting on the nature of touch understanding what the artists attempted to achieve in their performances becomes more accessible. This is related to Abramovic and Ulay's performances as one is able to more clearly understand the different subjective experiences that the artists created for each other and to those present for their performances. To begin, three points must be addressed as they create the foundation for the rest of the chapter. First, touching is not simply the act of hand-to-hand, hand-to-body, or body-to-body contact, but includes all of the emotions associated with contact. Second, touching is only a momentary experience. When one touches another he feels the pressure of the other's skin from the arm rising against the pressure of his hand and if he does not retract his hand, although the contact between the two remains, his skin becomes used to the contact with the other's arm and the moment of the touch passes. "There is no touch," says Erin Manning in *The Politics of Touch*, "that can last beyond the first moment of contact."<sup>xxviii</sup> <sup>4</sup> In order to continue to touch another one must be aware of the fleeting experience of touching and touch again in a way that brings attention to the act of touching.

Thirdly, touch can be thought of as an unmediated form of communication, one that does not require words or other symbols. Touching is the most fundamental way in which humans communicate; we show love, distain, familiarity,

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<sup>4</sup> Endnotes for Chapter 1 can be found on pages 62-63.

sympathy, superiority, and more through body-to-body interaction. We touch those significant to us differently than we touch strangers or an inanimate object, showing the intimate nature of touching. How we touch others defines our relationship to him. Everyday this is how we communicate with those physically around us. This chapter discusses how people communicated through the act of touching by understanding the other as related to himself and how Ulay and Abramovic's performances helped to more fully understand themselves and their partner.

Before continuing on to the concept of touching, it makes sense to first locate the site of touching: the body. After all, "the body," says Jean-Paul Sartre, "is a part of every perception."<sup>xxix</sup> In *Phenomenology of Perception*, Merleau-Ponty describes how one reacts to being stung by a mosquito. Instead of having to search for the place on his body to scratch, the one bitten immediately reacts to the sting and slaps his hand to the exact place of the mosquito. Rather than having to consciously think about where that mosquito has bitten, the body automatically reacts to the stimulus. This example is to reiterate the nature of how one moves and interacts not only with his body, and also by extension, with other's as well. For as Merleau-Ponty writes in the chapter "Spatiality of One's Own Body and Motility": "It is never our objective body that we move, but our phenomenal body, and there is no mystery in that, since our body, as the potentiality of this or that part of the world, surges towards objects to be grasped and perceives them."<sup>xxx</sup> This phenomenal body is the body we use to experience everything from hot and cold temperatures to painful sounds and delectable foods. There is no other way to experience the world except as an embodied being, embodied in the phenomenal body located in the world and



reacting with other phenomenal bodies. As this body moves through space it interacts with those around it, always potentially touching those in the immediate vicinity. These phenomenological experiences created by interactions help us to understand the world in which we live as an embodied subject rather than a body caught in Cartesian dualism: a splitting of the mind and body.

Merleau-Ponty designates the body as the site not only where we interact with the world, but also the site of our understanding and communication. He writes,

My body is the seat or rather the very actuality of the phenomenon of expression... My body is the fabric into which all objects are woven, and it is, at least in relation to the perceived world, the general instrument of my 'comprehension'... It is my body which gives significance not only to the natural object, but also to cultural objects...<sup>xxx</sup>

Here Merleau-Ponty stresses the importance of the body as the site of "expression," "comprehension," and "significance" as related to the objective world around us. These three terms show us the give-and-receive relationship our bodies have with their surrounding environment. In order to interact and communicate with others, there must be an understanding between the other and the body so that we might understand what we are communicating with or to. This communication and interaction is often not premeditated, after all, writes Merleau-Ponty, "[m]ovement is not thought about movement."<sup>xxx</sup> Similar to the mosquito example above, one does not have to think about moving his hand, arm, waist, and whole body when reaching to touch someone else. Without thinking about it he knows

exactly how far he needs to move his body in order to physically interact with that person.

Not only does the body communicate with others, it is the site of all interaction and perception of the world. Many have written on the aspect of touch as the fundamental sensory faculty. It is the sense that underlies all other senses. In her discussion of Emmanuel Levinas's *Totality and Infinity*, Luce Irigaray writes, "all the senses share in the nature of the caress, the hand serving, in its way, as the most intimate means of approach."<sup>xxxiii</sup> Irigaray sees the act of touching to be the most caring of the senses. For her no other sense can communicate love and understanding as can the sense of touch. Jean-Louis Chrétien points out in *The Call and the Response*, that "touch is separate from the other senses, since it does not require them, whereas they require it."<sup>xxxiv</sup> We cannot see or hear without light or sound waves physically hitting our eyes or ears; neither can we taste or smell without sensing mechanisms coming into contact with the stimulant, whether food or aromatics. Furthermore, we touch something in order to prove that what our eyes see is not illusion but reality; in this way touch distinguishes fantasy from actuality.<sup>xxxv</sup> Our sense of touch allows us to understand that the world does not simply disappear when we turn off the lights or shut our eyes. Merleau-Ponty writes of an "intentional arc" that embraces our past, future, and present as well as our sensual existence as human beings. This intentional arc "brings about the unity of the senses, of intelligence, of sensibility and motility."<sup>xxxvi</sup> His intentional arc describes every-day experiences we have with the world around us – a sort of synesthetic world in which we move, hear, smell, see, think, and touch without the

necessity to distinguish between the senses. By incorporating the intentional arc into our idea of the body image or *schema*, we are able to understand more concretely how touch is fundamental to all of our senses.

When one touches his left hand to his right, to take the famous Merleau-Pontian example of a chiasmatic encounter, he knows that he is touching, with his left hand, his right hand as a part of his body and that touching an object, say a book, with his left hand is fundamentally different. He continues, "When I press my two hands together, it is not a matter of two sensations felt together as one perceives two objects placed side by side, but an ambiguous set-up in which both hands can alternate the role of 'touching' and being 'touched.'"<sup>xxxvii</sup> When right and left hands clasp what is created is a paradoxical situation of being both subject and object of the touch. Yet, an object, to Merleau-Ponty, "is an object only insofar as it can be moved away from me... Its presence is such that it entails a possible absence," and therefore one can never understand his own body as an object since it can never physically "move away" nor be absent from himself.<sup>xxxviii</sup>

According to Erin Manning, as our bodies move through the world we create the space in which we live.<sup>xxxix</sup> In perceiving the world through the movement of our bodies, we create new experiences of it. Adding to Manning's idea that a touch is only a momentary phenomenon, movement ending with a touch establishes our world as a concrete space in which everything we know exists. Additionally, when touching another person one proves to himself that person's reality while simultaneously establishing himself as other. "When I reach toward you," Manning says, "I challenge the idea that I can know you, that I can interpret you, that I can

tactfully 'touch' you in the sense that I can convey to you your separateness."<sup>xi</sup> In this statement Manning suggests the idea that not only can a touch convey meaning from one to another, it can also infringe on the other's personal space; for this reason she believes every touch between two people is violent. However, this violence is not one that necessarily physically hurts the other, but represents the "unknowability" between two persons that keeps one from fully becoming the other.<sup>xii</sup> This unknowability allows one to understand himself as separate from the other, thus giving him personally-recognized individuality.

Like Manning, Merleau-Ponty sees movement as the creation of space. "It is clearly in action that the spatiality of our body is brought into being, and an analysis of one's own movement should enable us to arrive at a better understanding of it."<sup>xiii</sup> Not only does the body's movement create the space in which we move, but it also aids in the understanding of our own body – the phenomenal body – always in relation to the world. By extension, through moving toward and touching another person we understand our own body as a body in the world as well as understanding the other as a body in the world, similar to ours. He writes in *Phenomenology of Perception*,

The perceiving subject must, without relinquishing his place and his point of view, and in the opacity of sensation, reach out towards things to which he has, in advance, no key, and for which he nevertheless carries within himself the project, and open himself to an absolute Other which he is making ready in the depths of his being.<sup>xiiii</sup>

This quote represents the fundamental unknowability between self and other. Both Manning and Merleau-Ponty agree that although one can give himself

completely over to the other he still remains, for himself, in his own place as his own individual perceptive being.

The touching between two phenomenal bodies has the possibility of paradoxically bringing two people together while keeping them definitively apart. The tactile sensation one receives on account of contact with the other person concretely defines his alterity and distinctness from the other yet he can only receive that particular sensation when touching the other. This encounter defines not only the limits of his physical body but also his subjectivity. While touching it becomes clear that he and the other are not the same body. In *Phenomenology of Perception*, Merleau-Ponty writes of the body and subjectivity:

The central phenomenon, at the root of both my subjectivity and my transcendence towards others, consists in my being given to myself. *I am given*, that is, I find myself already situated and involved in a physical and social world – *I am given to myself*, which means that this situation is never hidden from me, it is never round about me as an alien necessity, and I am never in effect enclosed in it like an object in a box.<sup>xliv</sup>

Here, Merleau-Ponty demonstrates how one is situated in or “*given to*” the world that exists prior to his existence and, more importantly, his own knowledge of his existence. Therefore one understands that the world exists outside of his immediate perception and so the other must also exist for himself and not only for the one.

More concretely, touching confirms the reality, and more fundamentally, the presence of the other. Although one can hear or see the other, one can only truly know the other’s reality when he comes into physical contact with the other. Because touching sets up the opposition between the one and the other, not only

does touching confirm the reality of the other, but as it creates the limits of one's body it creates his body in general. Therefore one is intimately dependent on the other as a source of knowing himself. In *On Touching*, Jacques Derrida writes, "the other 'here' presents itself as that which will never be mine,"<sup>xlv</sup> affirming the necessary alterity of the other. Yet, as Merleau-Ponty says in *Signs*, "[t]he reason why I have evidence of the other man's being-there when I shake his hand is that his hand is substituted for my left hand,"<sup>xlvi</sup> extending the alterity to a relatable point rather than the alienation described by Derrida. Similar to Merleau-Ponty's experience of self-touching, when one touches another human he also understands that the other's hand is unlike a book but like his own. When he touches the other, he understands the other to be real as something more than an object, because shaking the other's right hand feels similar to clasping his hands together, right hand shaking left. Still, one can only understand the other in relation to himself. In this way when one touches the other, the physical encounter delineates the limits of both bodies for themselves and for the others, yet compels each to understand the other as a *body-subject* as he knows himself to be. This is a mutually dependent, reflexive situation in which the other marks the limits of one's body and simultaneously proves the other's reality to him, and his reality to himself. The relationship between the subject and object was shown in the above quote from Merleau-Ponty about the object being that which can be moved away from. Although one person can move away from another, he cannot escape from the fact that in being similar to himself, he sees the other as another self, and always as another subject.

Only after completely objectifying the other does he become a *body-object*. In an ethical relationship this would not happen, as the *body-object* is not recognized as something that is similar to oneself, that is, a subject. Just as one can never think of his body as an object, he can never think of the other as purely object but will always recognize the other's similarity to himself. This ethical relationship will be addressed more in depth in chapter three.

Manning writes of a "third space," one that questions the differentiation between self and other and creates a space between where two physically interact. "Touch challenges this dichotomy, creating not a self and an other, but a third space, a reciprocal body-space that challenges the limits of both self and self as other."<sup>xlvi</sup> When two people touch, a third space is created that is simultaneously includes both and neither of the parties. At the place of physical touching one's feeling of touch is indistinguishable from the person he touches because he feels the touch between his hand and the other's in addition to feeling his hand touching the other's hand feeling his. In other words, one feels the other in addition to feeling the physical act of touching the other. The latter is a more internal sensation, the feeling of one's feeling.

The chiasmic or crossing situation of the famous Merleau-Pontian example – when my right and left hands touch – is similar to the situation in which Ulay and Abramovic found themselves during their Relation Pieces or the late 1970's. Here the individual artists replaced the right and left hands. Simultaneity can be achieved if we think of the artist team as they often did, as "UMA," the resultant symbiotic couple-as-one-energy, discussed below.<sup>xlvi</sup> "UMA" was the "third space" created by

the artists when they performed together. While crashing into each other at running-speed in *Relation in Space*, both were acting upon the other while simultaneously being acted upon. In this way the artists questioned the traditional roles of the artist's body in relation to the art. Even though the artists were producing an art event, the final art "object" was the fusion of the artist and the artist's movements; the two are inseparable. The resultant object could not be sold or displayed in a gallery at any later time but was intrinsically bound with the moment of the performance and was a created object – something other than the artists but rather something between the artists. The impermanent nature of touching, as described by Manning above, became fundamental to the artists quest to find a completely un-marketable art form. What resulted was something they could move away from, as one can from an object, but in doing so necessarily destroyed it, creating the ephemerality they so desired. The artists defined this object as the energy created between the two of them. Abramovic explained this in an interview with Linda M. Montano from the eighties just before the two artists split up. "For us to put something together and produce a third thing, and for us not to kill each other but to stand next to each other, we create a third energy. The third energy is called that self, not myself, not himself."<sup>xlix</sup> This "that self" was integral to their actions as it helped to meld the distinctions between self and other for the artists. Instead of Abramovic concentrating on how she felt, or even on how Ulay felt, they could each concentrate on the energy, "UMA," between them.

Unlike many performance artists of their day, Ulay and Abramovic shied away from using many props, if any at all, focusing instead on using their bodies as



the primary medium, as a painter would a brush. This is especially true in their earlier performances. There are several reasons why the use of the body is fundamental in Ulay and Abramovic's performances. In Abramovic's words, by simply using their naked bodies, their performances became inherently "natural."<sup>i</sup> In a 2002 interview with Klaus Biesenbach, Abramovic was asked, "Why focus on your body?" to which she replied, "[b]ody is the only thing I can really relate to. It's real, I can feel it, I can touch it, I can cut it."<sup>ii</sup> In interviews with Ulay and Abramovic the theme of the body appears again and again and the way in which they used their bodies is two-fold. The artists used their bodies as a more direct means of achieving new experiences, "[a]ll we had was the body," they said.<sup>iii</sup> Secondly they used their body in order to communicate with the audience so that the latter might experience something new. The second use will be left until the third and final chapter of the thesis.

Just as one can never completely know the other, neither could Abramovic completely know Ulay. Although they forced their bodies into each other, smashing against each other as in *Relation in Space*, they were unable to fully integrate their physical bodies. In *Interruption in Space*, performed at the Düsseldorf *Kunstakademie "Rinke Klasse"* in January of 1977, the two ran towards each other, much like the earlier *Relation in Space*, only to be prematurely stopped by the wall that separated them.<sup>iiii</sup> No matter how hard they threw themselves towards each other there was always an unmovable force between them, separating them, keeping them apart. This performance reflects the inherent unknowability between

two people, as addressed by Manning and Merleau-Ponty and physically shows their inability to be completely incorporated into one physical being.

As one is incapable to completely become an other, Ulay and Abramovic held themselves concretely apart yet inherently together through performances such as *Expansion in Space*. *Expansion in Space* was the performance in which the two repeatedly hurled themselves towards opposing mobile pillars. Each time after their bodies hit the pillars they would step backwards until their bodies touched back-to-back. Although they were performing distinctly separate, albeit similar-looking, actions they always returned back to the other, always grounding themselves in relation to the other. The two stepped back gingerly until their bodies gently bumped into each other. No matter how forcefully they expelled their bodies away from the other, they always returned. In this way they repeatedly confirmed the other's presence although each could not see the other. Rather than relying on their sense of sight they depended on the physical interaction, back-against-back, to confirm that the other was indeed there.

While they established each of their personal experiences in relation to the other, the two also confirmed the other's existence. Theoretically Abramovic could know that Ulay's existence only in relation to herself. This point is proven much more soundly by looking at the performance *Light/Dark* from October 1977. As was explained in the introduction, the pair sat facing each other and alternated slapping the other across the face. Because the actions were mirror-like, for the sake of clarity we will look at the situation from Abramovic's situation. After she slapped Ulay her hand returned to her thigh and was immediately acted upon by Ulay – she

received a slap in the face. It was a nearly momentary chain of actions: Abramovic touched Ulay, touched herself, and then was touched by Ulay. After she touched Ulay and touched herself, she created an understanding of his body for and in relation to herself. After Ulay touched her, she gained insight into what Ulay must have felt when she touched him only moments before. Likewise, Ulay would have gained an understanding of Abramovic's position in this way. This relates back to Merleau-Ponty's theory that when one shakes another's hand each replaces the other's hand with his own, creating a site of mutual understanding. Continuing in this line, Abramovic figuratively replaced her body with Ulay's and was able to understand Ulay's physical state.

In addition to the self and the other, through touching Ulay and Abramovic set up several other dichotomous situations. When they performed they sought to blur the distinction between what were (and still are) socially dictated gender roles and therefore sought to weaken the distinctions between the components of the dichotomies. By performing as male and female and simultaneously subject and art object, Ulay and Abramovic attempted to break the generally held stereotype of male as the subject, and female as the object. They not only questioned the dichotomy of male and female but also between the performer's body as simultaneously subject and object. Willoughby Sharp writes of body art, "[t]he artist's body becomes both the subject and the object of the work. The artist is the subject and the object of the action."<sup>liv</sup> Ulay and Abramovic are simultaneously subject and object in several of their early pieces, but most notably in *Relation in*

*Space*. As was discussed above, in *Relation in Space* both artists are, at the same moment, acting upon the other and being acted upon.

Something that has only been addressed in minimal detail in this chapter is the violent nature of Ulay and Abramovic's pieces. "Violence" in this instance does not relate back to Manning's definition as representing unknowability but rather violence as we think of it in an every-day sense. It involves the violence seen in *Light/Dark* or *Relation in Space*, real bodies committing real physical pain onto another. The next chapter attends to the violent nature of touching in Ulay and Abramovic's performances as seen through the lens of the history of the word "masochism."

## Chapter 2: Masochism

The early performances of Ulay and Abramovic are often seen as masochistic. In *Expansion in Space* they continuously and for an extended period of time throw their naked bodies against mobile pillars and in *Breathing In/Breathing Out*, they delay the intake of fresh air for nearly twenty minutes, until the brink of asphyxiation. In the light of these and other auto-violent performances it is understandable how the artists' actions could be construed as masochistic. In order to assess why they have been labeled as such, the word "masochistic" and its associations must be parsed.

The definition of the word "masochistic" has fractured since it was first coined in the late nineteenth century – diverging from a strict psychological definition to an everyday, common household term that has only a little to do with the original meaning. In the more than one hundred years of the word's existence, cultural movements such as the sexual revolution have changed the definition from a "perversion" to the general usage of the term as anything self-deprecative.

The fourth edition of the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM-IV)* defines Sexual Masochism as a sexual paraphilia alongside behaviors such as Frotteurism and Pedophilia.<sup>lv 5</sup> In this psychiatric handbook, masochism is defined as a sexual deviance, "involving the act (real, not simulated) of being humiliated, beaten, bound, or otherwise made to suffer."<sup>lvi</sup> The peculiar activity necessarily leads to "impairment in social, occupational, or other important areas of functioning," as stated by the *DSM-IV*.<sup>lvii</sup> According to the technical

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<sup>5</sup> Endnotes for Chapter 2 can be found on pages 63-64.

definition, the masochist engages in “real” action and does not only fantasize about the desired events. These “sexually arousing” fantasies must be performed.<sup>lviii</sup>

Additionally, emphasis is taken off of the pleasure the masochist feels and placed on how such a deviance impairs one’s social behavior, removing it from the realm of the personal, where one might normally think a sexual inclination would belong, into the public. Unlike the other paraphilias categorized with masochism, masochism is seen as harmful only to the practitioner and only becomes alarmingly dangerous when practiced chronically, and involving more dangerous and more elaborate fantasies.<sup>lix</sup>

Psychiatrist Richard von Krafft-Ebing first coined the word “masochism” in his 1886 book *Psychopathia Sexualis*, naming it after the popular historian and Austrian novelist Leopold von Sacher-Masoch and his semi-autobiographical accounts of young dandies seeking mastery over initially unwilling females.<sup>lx</sup>

Sacher-Masoch’s most widely read book, *Venus in Furs*, is the story of young Severin who, in an attempt to skirt his familial responsibilities, travels to the countryside where he is introduced to a lovely widow named Wanda von Dunajew. He pursues Wanda, begging her to be his lover, his wife, “a tyrant...[and] a despot,” to which she is initially hesitant.<sup>lxi</sup> Severin conquers her resistance, convinces her to dictate his every move, and they begin an affair in which he completely submits to her and her wishes. The story ends after Severin receives a beating from Wanda’s new lover with whom she then leaves. Without the control he once held over her, the control to convince her to act out his fantasy of domination, Severin returns home where he “donned my father’s boots of Spanish leather,” and gave up his masochistic

practices.<sup>lxii</sup> To Krafft-Ebing, Sacher-Masoch's stories exemplified what he saw in some of his male patients who had been exhibiting "female-like" characteristics and a perversion of morality that permeated society.<sup>lxiii</sup> The masochist was seen by the psychiatrist to be one who derives sexual pleasure from being dominated, humiliated, or disgraced, which is true of Sacher-Masoch's heroes. Krafft-Ebing defined masochism as a "peculiar perversion of the psychical *vita sexualis* in which the individual affected, in sexual feeling and thought, is controlled by the idea of being completely and unconditionally subject to the will of a person of the opposite sex; of being treated by this person as by a master, humiliated and abused."<sup>lxiv</sup>

The idea of humiliation or shame is inherent in many definitions of masochism. Yet, in *Between the Body and the Flesh: Performing Sadomasochism*, Lynda Hart explains that "[o]ne can experience shame without being ashamed."<sup>lxv</sup> While shame is the feeling of humiliation, being ashamed connotes a feeling of guilt. One can feel shame, that is can be humiliated without feeling guilty about the situation or that he is doing something that is socially frowned upon. Sacher-Masoch rejected the label of a sexual deviant partly due to the lack of this guilt.

John Noyes explains in *Mastery of Submission: Inventions of Masochism*, that while Krafft-Ebing was defining a perversion based on Sacher-Masoch's private activities and those of his characters, Sacher-Masoch was writing in order to bring attention to the socio-political climate of 19<sup>th</sup> century Eastern Europe surrounding the failing Austrian Empire.<sup>lxvi</sup> According to Noyes, "[social] violence is displaced into the realm of sexuality," and "instead of depicting scenes of civil violence and unrest, he [Sacher-Masoch] transposes these into the private lives of his

characters.<sup>lxvii</sup> Therefore, Noyes argues, Krafft-Ebing missed the point of Sacher-Masoch's political commentary, mistaking it instead for a social ill and deviance.

In 1941, just over fifty years after the term "masochism" was introduced, there was already a schism in the definition. Theodor Reik, a student of Sigmund Freud, attempted to repair the rupture in his study entitled "Masochism in Modern Man," now included in a collection of his writings entitled *Of Love and Lust*.<sup>lxviii</sup> Rather than being inherently sexual, Reik claims the opposite to be true – that to be masochistic is simply one's "attitude" toward life.<sup>lxix</sup> He wrote, "[t]he word has outgrown its narrower, sexual meaning and has become desexualized."<sup>lxx</sup> This is similar to its use today; everything from extreme dieting to self-deprecation and any self-destructive activities or attitudes is often labeled "masochistic." Similar to *Psychopathia Sexualis*, "Masochism in Modern Man" is a collection of case descriptions and includes a story of a young female who "as a girl had extensive masochistic phantasies no longer gave any indication of these [as a grown woman]," but "did not miss any opportunity whatever to draw attention to the fact that she could not accomplish anything, had no distinct character, and was inferior to other women as to charm and amiability. It seemed as if she wanted to demonstrate to all the world her complete insignificance."<sup>lxxi</sup>

Perhaps because of Reik, masochism is no longer thought of as a strictly sexualized proclivity. In his attempt to incorporate the many definitions of masochism, Reik also changed the way in which masochism is generally thought. The common inclusion of self-deprecation and self-deprivation into masochism is addressed by several performance art scholars, whose ideas will be attended to



below, and popular culture but is yet to be adopted into the institutionalized definition. Reik established a definition of masochism based on attributes common to all who engage in what he diagnosed as masochistic attitudes and set up a triad of characteristics he saw as inherent to all of those definitions: “phantasy”, suspense, and demonstration.<sup>lxxii</sup> According to Reik, a text-book defined masochist must enact all three characteristics. The masochist must exhibit “the passive nature, the feeling of impotence and the submission to another person, the cruel, humiliating and shameful treatment by this person and the consequent sexual excitement.”<sup>lxxiii</sup> This definition, he says, is “nothing new.”<sup>lxxiv</sup>

“Phantasy,” he says “is the most important” because the imaginative aspect of masochism establishes the scene and the events prior to their happening.<sup>lxxv</sup> Before the masochist can act out his desires he must first invent them and fantasize about them, in what Reik calls the “masochistic ritual.”<sup>lxxvi</sup> Fantasy sets the stage for the event to happen. It is the forethought of the ritual, one in which the masochist imagines the scenario as he wants it to unfold. The fantasy instigates the masochist to act in a way he feels he will attain the most pleasure.

Suspense is the anxiety that is produced from the postponement of the climax or what Reik calls the “end-pleasure.”<sup>lxxvii</sup> When the masochistic ritual is repeatedly performed, the tension becomes the source of pleasure for the masochist instead of the end-pleasure. He writes, “the minutes waiting expectantly for the blow are more important libidiously than the blow itself.”<sup>lxxviii</sup> Although it is fantasy that Reik names as the most important aspect to this tri-fold definition, his redefinition by consolidation emphasizes the suspenseful aspect. “Masochism is not,

as has been surmised up till now, characterized by the pleasure in discomfort but by pleasure in the *expectation* of discomfort,” Reik clarifies.<sup>lxxix</sup> This new definition thus changed the very nature of masochism itself by altering the moment of gratification. Instead of deriving pleasure from pain, Reik says that masochistic pleasure is in the moment when there is no pain, only the prospect the awaiting of such pain.

The third variable of the equation is demonstration, but it is not performing the act itself that makes it demonstrative, as one might surmise. It can instead be thought of as the other side of the coin of exhibitionism: a self-deprecating sort of exhibitionism in which the masochist sees himself as ugly or disgusting furthering the excitement of the fantasy. By employing self-deprecation, the masochist, who might normally think highly of himself, prepares for the fantasy to unfold; he readies himself for the debasement that makes the domination all the more exciting.

Finally Reik sets up a fourth characteristic that, while important in the diagnosis of some masochists, is not present in all cases and therefore is left out of the three necessary components. This fourth term is the “provocation” of the other into playing the masochist’s game. It is the hunt to find a mate that the masochist can convince to carry out his fantasies. Reik sees the hunt, or provocation, as being too closely aligned with the active aspects of sadism – a perversion Reik was not willing to equate with masochism – and yet another reason he chose not to include it in his primary characteristics. However, provocation remains important in this study of masochism as it is emphasized in Deleuze’s reading of Reik’s definition.

In his book *Coldness and Cruelty*, Gilles Deleuze performs a close reading of Sacher-Masoch’s *Venus in Furs* using Reik’s three fundamental characteristics of

masochism. Building on the foundation established by Reik, Deleuze includes the fourth, provocation, and adds his own, the contract. In his real-life relationships Sacher-Masoch drew up contracts with his lovers, conferring power to them, though always with contingencies. These stipulations undermined the women's absolute power over him and, as argued by Deleuze, allowed Sacher-Masoch to retain control over his ladies.<sup>lxxx</sup> Some restrictions in Sacher-Masoch's contract with his lover Fanny von Pistor include a pre-determined length of time of six months,<sup>6</sup> a limit on what she could do in public – she could not make him do anything that might besmirch his name – and a daily six-hour respite in which she could not bother him while he worked.<sup>lxxxii</sup> These highly specific contracts give insight into the private life of the namesake of masochism. Additionally they show how the drafted rules were carried out leaving Sacher-Masoch in control of his chosen lady and thus of his pleasure all the while acting the vanquished.

Similar to masochism, the feeling of pleasure can connote emotions that are not limited to the sexual realm. Pleasure is a feeling of satisfaction of something done of one's own accord, not of necessity.<sup>lxxxii</sup> Unlike what Freud would have us believe, not all experiences, and more specifically not all pleasurable experiences, are of a sexual nature. The ways in which one can experience pleasure include – but are certainly not restricted to – a walk on a beautiful spring day, a religious or spiritual experience or the completion of writing a paper. It is acceptable to recognize the appropriateness of the desexualized definition from the original

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<sup>6</sup> Coincidentally, six months is also the amount of time the *DSM-IV* gives as the duration of the behavior necessary for a diagnosis of masochism (573).

classification of masochism since one can derive pleasure from experiences other than sex or those sexually related. Deleuze writes of a “secondary gain” that the masochist receives in addition to his intended gratification, something that can be used to justify the aggressive behavior either to himself or another.<sup>lxxxiii</sup> The secondary gain differentiates itself from the primary gain in that it is not the principal pleasure received – the gratification intended by the masochist – yet still produces satisfaction. Deleuze’s definition of the primary gain is similar to what Reik calls the end-pleasure, the masochist’s first intention, whereas the secondary gain, while also pleasurable, is dependant on the primary gain and may not necessarily be included in the masochist’s initial fantasy.

As discussed above, Deleuze sees the contract as the object that gives the masochist power, but also shows the consensual aspect of masochism. While masochistic tendencies do not necessarily involve the elaborate lengths to which Sacher-Masoch went it always must involve mutual and contractual participation to insure the safety and pleasure of those involved and in order to distinguish it from unwanted sexual violence. “[T]he contract,” says Deleuze, “presupposes in principle the free consent of the contracting parties and determines between them a system of reciprocal rights and duties.”<sup>lxxxiv</sup> Each participant is given “rights” and allocated “duties” to perform during the course of the contract. Additionally, the *Conversio Virium*: New York City’s Student BDSM (bondage, discipline, dominance and submission, sadism and masochism) Education Group from Columbia University decrees that “[t]he very act of referring to any activity of BDSM defines it as being

consensual.”<sup>lxxxv</sup> Anything other than consensual BDSM can be considered sexual assault.

Deleuze sees masochism as a highly intellectual pursuit, building upon Reik’s stress on the importance of fantasy. The weight Reik places on fantasy involves a necessarily strong imagination and the desire for ever more challenging intellectual activity. For the same reason Deleuze sees masochism as an aesthetic perversion. By labeling it as “intellectual” and “aesthetic,” Deleuze again completely changes the way one thinks about masochism. In this light, putting masochism into the same category as Necrophilia and Zoophilia, additional paraphilias in the *DSM-IV*, seems to assign it to a category in which it does not fit. Being aesthetic and intellectual, masochism seems much less perverse than those “philiias” with which it is associated in the field of psychiatry. As a self-proclaimed masochist, Anita Phillips defines masochism as a perversion, albeit “a very intelligent perversion.”<sup>lxxxvi</sup> She sees it as a perversion that involves “being hurt in exactly the right way and at the right time, within a sophisticated, highly artificial situation.”<sup>lxxxvii</sup> It requires forethought, persistence, and organizational skills to fabricate the elaborate scenarios that give masochism this intellectual and creative connotation.

To this point the definition of masochism has been focused on the masochist himself and there has been little talk of the one upon whom the masochist’s fantasy is dependant. The only mention has been of a “her” and she is talked about very abstractly. The relationship between the two – the masochist and his lady of choice – has only been addressed in relation to the contract, in which Deleuze paradoxically identifies the masochist as holding the position of power. Based on these

observations, it is safe to say that the masochist is a very selfish person; he seeks out and alters the character of the woman of his fancy in order to fit her to his ideal and fantasy, fixating on his own wants and desires. The entire scenario is fabricated for *his* pleasure. Yet, rarely does anyone write that the sought out lady is beloved by the masochist. For example, Severin is enamored of Wanda, and, ultimately, his rejection is due to this undying love. For him, the cruelest form of punishment possible is when she retracts her love for him, disrupting the power he held over her. Yet, instead of pleasure this punishment makes him feel angered and bitter. In *Venus in Furs* the widow gives in to Severin's pleading and, seemingly against her will, acts the part he wants her to play. It is out of love that she continues to debase him until she can no longer stand him, his love, or his game, showing that she had never been in full support of the situation. Even Krafft-Ebing placed importance on the inclusion of the other and described self-flagellation as independent of masochism.<sup>lxxxviii</sup> During self-flagellation the person is more active than passive therefore his actions are more closely associated with sadism rather than masochism. Masochism cannot be self-inflicted because it, to quote Deleuze, "implies a passive stage...through which an external agent is made to assume the role of the subject."<sup>lxxxix</sup> This is opposed to sadism which necessarily involves an active subject acting upon the passive.

The *other* must be an important aspect of masochism: there always has to be a Wanda for Severin or a Fanny von Pistor for Sacher-Masoch. It is a collaborative enterprise that relies on two active parties; active in the sense that the masochist seeks out a lady who then acts out the contractually agreed upon behavior.

Masochism is an inherently cooperative event. Phillips emphasizes this aspect of masochism by describing the lasting connection between two people that is formed through the practice.<sup>xc</sup> When performed between two consensual partners, according to Phillips, masochism gives a couple a chance to bond, paradoxically creating a safe arena in which they can let go of inhibitions and truly open up emotionally to the other person.

For the remainder of this chapter the performances of Ulay and Abramovic will be explored through the definition of masochism set fourth by Deleuze. This definition is used because Deleuze incorporates both Reik's and Krafft-Ebing's definitions while expanding upon them in order that it may fit into a contemporary mindset. Additionally, Phillip's argument will be employed because as a self-proclaimed masochist she has insights into personal relationships involving masochism, something completely lacking in Deleuze's study.

Many performance art scholars, like Amelia Jones, see performed masochism as a means of renewal through destruction. "Trying to prove that he or she is alive, the body artist slices and dices the skin. Trying to externalize internal pain (of the physical/psychic variety), the artist slashes, punctures or otherwise ravages the exterior of the body."<sup>xc</sup> According to Jones, when Ulay and Abramovic collided at full running speed in *Relation in Space* they were calling their own attention to their own physical and mental anguish. In this way the masochistic act can be seen as cathartic.

In her book *Contract with the Skin: Masochism, Performance Art and the 1970s*, Kathy O'Dell defines the "masochistic performance" as "performance art that

centered around individual acts of bodily violence.”<sup>xcii</sup> Ulay and Abramovic’s performances certainly fit into that category with their mind (and body) numbing repetitive and violent motions. She goes on to speculate why many performance artists of the 1970’s rejected the label of masochism and cites Italian art critic Lea Vergine when she says that the artists were always aware of what they were doing, and even if they did not see their actions as masochistic they can be labeled as masochistic.<sup>xciii</sup> On the other hand, O’Dell sees the masochistic act in performance as having a particular intentionality on the part of the artist, done for a specific reason. She sees it as calling attention to certain dichotomies that dominate everyday life, including the public and private, human as subject or object, and the performer as opposed to the audience. O’Dell sees the destruction of the body in performance art as a necessarily alienating experience on the part of the audience all the while reminding the audience of the inherent subject/object relationship that occurs between them and the performers.<sup>xciv</sup>

The performances of Abramovic and Ulay are not sadistic because each of the artists takes an active position within the performance and both parties are willingly present. However, this chapter will also show how they should not be considered masochistic. They set themselves apart from many of their contemporary performance artists because they worked as a couple. To work as a pair was still a novel concept in performance art in the 1970’s and there are only a few instances of this happening. And because Abramovic and Ulay acted upon the other reflexively, there was no primary aggressor. Each artist interacted on an equal level; Ulay did not solely act on Abramovic or vice versa. Because of this



reflexive relationship Abramovic and Ulay continually and instantaneously trade positions of power. In *Light/Dark*, when Ulay slaps Abramovic, he is the aggressive agent and she the passive, but that dynamic changes almost immediately when she slaps him. They are not active and passive at the same time, rather the roles exchange instantaneously as the performance proceeds.

Abramovic and Ulay were lovers, and yet their performances did not reflect their personal life, as they were explicitly not violent towards each other outside of their performances.<sup>xcv</sup> For this reason alone, Krafft-Ebing would deny that the couple could be considered masochistic, since their sexual life did not include violence. However, if we continue with Deleuze's definition, assessment of their performances as masochistic is not dismissed despite the apparent lack of sexual stimulation. The two artists exhibited the Reikian characteristic fantasy in the planning stage of their performances. In preparing for *Light/Dark*, Abramovic and Ulay did not practice the motions beforehand – this is a fundamental aspect of their performances. They never re-performed and only planned how the performances would proceed. “We never rehearsed. We never knew how far we would go, how long we could go on.”<sup>xcvi</sup> The event was planned out or fantasized about prior to the performance in order to develop the foundations and limits of *Light/Dark*, including, but not restricted to, who would commence slapping, how they would position themselves in relation to the audience, what they would wear, the decision about the lamp and where it would shine, and how the performance would end. In this way they displayed the first of the three main components of the Reiking definition of masochism.

While they did exhibit the characteristic of fantasy, they lacked both the suspense and demonstrative characteristics. Because Reik and in turn Deleuze believed that without exhibiting the requisite three characteristics a person could not be classified a masochist, Ulay and Abramovic cannot be labeled as such. The second component of the Reikian-Deleuzian definition is suspense. The suspense in Abramovic and Ulay's pieces might at first seem obvious due to the extended duration in which they were performed. In fact the suspense of the pieces is what makes Ulay and Abramovic such successful artists and was what they strove for in many of their durational pieces. They were trying to see how long they could maintain uncomfortable positions or situations in order to test the limits of their bodies.<sup>xcvii</sup> An example of this is in *Breathing In/Breathing Out*. By delaying the intake of fresh oxygen for nearly twenty minutes they suspended the moment of release. By postponing the moment when they refresh their oxygen supply with their first breath, *Breathing In/Breathing Out* exhibits the beautiful frailty of life. The suspended time, along with the inter-body contact, draws the artist's attention not only to the limits of the body but also to its innate mortality. Deleuze insists that the aesthetic component of masochism is located in the arena of suspense.<sup>xcviii</sup> However, the suspense Ulay and Abramovic exhibited was not a masochistic style of suspense. In fact, it was exactly the opposite. Instead of the masochist's desire for the postponement of the blow – "the minutes waiting expectantly for the blow are more important libidinally than the blow itself," Ulay and Abramovic withstood long bouts of discomfort waiting for the moment of cessation of pain, teasing the

other with the potential of being slapped, as in *Light/Dark*, the suspense was in the waiting for there to no longer be pain.<sup>xcix</sup>

Finally, they fail to perform the demonstrative function in the public eye. At no time did the artists debase themselves or each other, even when they talk about the breakup of their twelve-year relationship. The Deleuzian reading of Reik, states that the demonstrative feature is “the particular way in which the masochist exhibits his suffering embarrassment and humiliation...”<sup>c</sup> Ulay and Abramovic were and are not ashamed or humiliated by their performances and so cannot fulfill this aspect of the definition of masochism.

Inherent to masochism is the idea of pain. Without pain there would be no paraphilia and no sought-after pleasure; it is the physical suffering that acts as the gateway to satisfaction for the masochist. Abramovic and Ulay did sustain mild physical injuries – bruises and scratches – in their performances. And although Abramovic claims that the point of their pieces is not the pain itself but the energy communicated to the audience, they continue to be labeled as masochistic. “We were hurting each other, but pain was not the issue; it was a side effect.”<sup>ci</sup> Phillips also argues that masochism is not simply about the pain, but that the pain is a “road... to intense pleasure and renewal.”<sup>cii</sup> Abramovic reiterates this idea of regenerative pain when she says, “It is not the pain itself that matters. We never did things for the pleasure of pain. We were looking for a key, a way to break through the body, to open something up, which is a desire that comes from another side of truth or reality.”<sup>ciii</sup> The couple’s primary gain was to have a new personal experience and the secondary gain was for the audience members’ alternate

experience. Like Severin seeking out Wanda in order that she might satisfy his desires, Abramovic and Ulay used their performances for their own end-pleasure, to experience something other than the every-day. This further shows how they are not masochistic as they use pain not as a means of deriving pleasure from pain but rather to achieve an end that does not necessarily need to employ the use of pain. The painful experience is not always the best way to “open something up,” it is not always the best “key,” but for Ulay and Abramovic it was the most effective means of doing so; “pain is such a good door to cross into another state of consciousness.”<sup>civ</sup> Through the use of painful stimuli, Ulay and Abramovic claimed to be able to move outside of themselves, a moment of “absolutely doing what you are doing...you are not separate any more from your own idea.”<sup>cv</sup> The artists were looking to achieve a liminal state – something beyond the mundane. In this way the pleasure they feel is akin to a religious ecstasy as they used these ritual-like and meditative-like gestures in order to experience liminality.

The contract, Deleuze’s added fifth condition of masochism, is especially important in *Light/Dark* and many of their other performances. In *Light/Dark* the contract sets boundaries that both artists have to adhere to, boundaries that create a safe space in which the two can interact. As per their agreement Abramovic knew that when she stopped Ulay would stop as well. In an interview with Linda M. Montano, Abramovic states, “when Ulay and I make a performance, I know exactly how far we can trust each other.”<sup>cvi</sup> Via their unwritten contract, Abramovic and Ulay created a safe arena not unlike what Phillips writes about in her book – a safe

arena where those performing masochism feel as though they can be open to explore their fantasies safely and judgment free.

Although they have been categorized into a masochistic label, Ulay and Abramovic are by definition not masochists. They do not fit the clinical criteria put forth in the *DSM-IV*, nor the psychologically inspired philosophical definition as established by Deleuze. Furthermore, as is attested by quotes from the artists themselves, they do not see themselves as masochistic nor their actions as masochistic. The definition used by art scholars labeling them as such is a colloquial, pop-culture definition that gives little thought to the rich etymology of the term “masochism.”

Much of the writing on masochistic performance art is seen from the vantage of the audience and how the audience can understand the performances. The audience, although explicitly necessary to the performance, is only a part of Ulay and Abramovic’s secondary gain of trying to impart to the other a new experience. Therefore the artist – audience interaction does not change the artist’s masochistic classification. The interaction between the audience and the performer will be addressed in the following chapter’s reading of Merleau-Ponty’s ideas on the reflexive relation between one and the the other, adding the sense of sight to the bodily experience.

### Chapter 3: Role of the Spectator

To this point only the relationship between the two artists has been addressed in detail. Yet, in the preceding chapters there has been one pervasively present element: the audience. The audience is important to the study of performance art because unlike painting or sculpture, the audience's presence potentially modifies the performance. Whether by coughing, mindless fidgeting, or simply by being present, the audience changes the nature of the performance just by the fact that the performers cannot anticipate or control the audience's reaction.

Aside from photographic, filmic, and written documentation, few physical artifacts exist as reminders of performance art pieces and the artist's and the audience's memories are the only relics left after the inherently ephemeral project ends. Performance art, specifically what Rebecca Schneider calls "explicit body art" always requires a "reciprocity... an audience/performer relationship."<sup>cvii</sup> 7 Schneider defines explicit body art as art that "unfolds" or opens and exposes the body as a way of addressing its social relation.<sup>cviii</sup> Explicit body art necessarily interacts with and comments on society. Unlike other visual arts like painting and sculpture, which place the audience at a distance, performance art generally involves the performer with the spectator because the artists are in close physical proximity to the spectator. Ulay and Abramovic's performances are no exception. The discussion of Ulay and Abramovic's work becomes more complicated after the audience is included. The complication is due to a second set of interactions that is added on top of the communication between Ulay and Abramovic, as discussed in the first

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<sup>7</sup> Endnotes for Chapter 3 can be found on pages 64-65.

chapter. This second interaction, between the artists and the audience, is the topic for this third and final chapter.

The focus here is on the symbolic meaning the audience can bring away from a body art performance. By extension the chapter shows how the interaction between audience and artist makes the meaning of the performance identifiable by audience members. Many performance art scholars have written on the significance of the body as a means of communication in performance art. These ideas will form the foundation for this chapter's theory. Kristine Stiles writes that, "action in art draws viewers closer to the fact that it is the body itself that produces objects," forcing the viewer to think of the work of art as produced by the physical actions of a body.<sup>cxix</sup> Kathy O'Dell describes the performer's body as symbolic, which the audience "...experienced *through* its representations, its symbolic meanings, its metaphoric reverberations."<sup>cx</sup> Roselee Goldberg writes on the experiential aspect of performance art, defining the body as "the most direct medium of expression."<sup>cxii</sup> All of these writers underline the symbolic nature of the body in performance art as the means by which the spectator can begin to understand the artist's intention. Therefore the bodies of Ulay and Abramovic are thought only as symbols able to communicate with the audience.

In "The Intertwining – The Chiasm," arguably the most important chapter from the posthumously published *The Visible and the Invisible*, Merleau-Ponty emphasizes the entangled relationship between the sense of sight and touch.<sup>cxiii</sup> Here, he highlights the similarity between "palpation" or touching of the skin with the eyes and with the hand, concluding that looking at someone is a way of touching

him through a tissue, or what he calls the *flesh* that lines our phenomenal bodies.<sup>cxiii</sup>

This flesh is not synonymous with the literal skin that delineates our physical body, but a perceptual flesh that emanates from and intertwines with others, allowing communication between two to take place. For Merleau-Ponty, looking at another is equivalent to touching him, as if touching with his eyes.<sup>cxiv</sup> This sensory connection is necessary when talking about the relationship between performers and spectators because it is generally through the visual connection that the audience member relates to the performer.

Through sight, one can come to a closer understanding of the other by analogously relating what he sees in the other's experiences to his own. The touching and touched relationship expounded by Merleau-Ponty, addressed in the first chapter, implies a subject and object relationship that does not privilege the subject – the person who is touching. Rather, one is compelled into a relationship with the other that allows the person touching to understand the touched person's physical self. In this relationship one understands his experiences as a connection with the other's and in relation with the world. This tactile relationship can, however, be extended into the visual realm. If the other clasps his hands together as someone watches, the spectator can understand that the feeling the other feels – right hand touching left – to be similar to the experience when his own right hand meets his left.<sup>cxv</sup> This is similar to real, everyday phenomenal experiences. This relationship can be further extended into a more personal connection and the spectator can understand, or assume to understand, the other's subjective experience, by relating the other's situation to his own.



“If my consciousness has a body,” Merleau-Ponty asks, “why should other bodies not ‘have’ consciousnesses?”<sup>cxvi</sup> If a person can understand the other to have a consciousness similar to his own, then he can begin to imagine that what the other feels is similar to what he feels, both physically and emotionally. Although one can never fully know how or what the other is feeling, it is at this point of understanding that the two fall into an empathetic<sup>8</sup> relationship with each other, “because,” according to Merleau-Ponty, “my body is capable of achieving the same goals [as the other’s is].”<sup>cxvii</sup> Through sight, one can empathize with the other in one of two ways: direct experience or hypothesis. First, by relating past, direct experiences that were the same as what the other experiences, or hypothesis in which one draws upon multiple experiences, synthesizing them to form a sense of the other’s experience. For example, when one stubs his toe those around him understand the pain he feels because they have all stubbed their toes too. An example of hypothesis using Ulay and Abramovic’s *Expansion in Space* follows.

When Abramovic and Ulay threw themselves against the pillars in *Expansion in Space*, those watching would have understood that the artists were experiencing pain. That same feeling of empathy is simulated even today by watching the documentary film. Although it is not likely that any audience member understood or understands by direct experience, one can understand by drawing upon memories of accidentally running into a doorframe or being shoved against a wall. In

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<sup>8</sup> The word “empathy” is used here instead of “sympathy” so as to not include feelings of sorrow that are sometimes associated with the latter. Instead, “empathy” is used to promote the idea of understanding between two people, a sharing of feelings between the two that is not necessarily sympathetic.

this way vision is a means through which the other's sense of touch or being touched can be accessed, fundamentally enmeshing the visual and the haptic senses. While this exists in every-day experiences, the conflation of sight and touch becomes more specific in the study of performance art. By addressing this conflation one is able to approximate an understanding of the artist's situation and what they were trying to communicate.

Furthermore, by understanding the integration between sight and touch one can more accurately define why performance art can be so effective. Ulay and Abramovic sought to bring the spectator into the performance hoping to create a symbiotic relationship between artists and audience. In this symbiotic relationship both the artists and the audience members are needed to complete the performance. The audience uses the artists to watch and face a different personal experience and the artists use the audience in order to prolong the duration of the performances, a topic that is addressed below. Both are mutually dependant on the other's presence, each playing off the other's reactions. The artists alter the performance as they react to the audience member's reactions. It is through this symbiotic relationship that the performance is brought into existence.

In a 1996 interview with Paul Kokke Ulay said, "[w]e wanted to make the audience, in their position as recipients or spectators, part of the performance..."<sup>cxviii</sup>

By choosing activities that were simple and easily recognized by the audience member, the artists hoped to force the spectator to look back upon himself so that he would not only experience Ulay and Abramovic's interaction with each other but also a subjective response to the artists. The subjective response could be anything

from repulsion to the recalling of memories and was a private experience, unique to each spectator. Both Ulay and Abramovic put heavy emphasis on the role of the audience member. In the same interview with Kokke as quoted above, Ulay claimed, “[w]hat we have done with our performance is due to the role of the spectator,” suggesting that the performances were designed so that the spectator could create for themselves these unique experiences.<sup>cxix</sup> Abramovic describes this situation as being like a “mirror,” a mirror onto which the audience can project themselves.<sup>cxx</sup>

Even though the artists created these performances with the spectator in mind, not once during Ulay and Abramovic’s violent performances did an audience member step in to “save” the artists from their self-inflicted pain. This created an unbalanced relationship between the artists and the audience shown by the audience’s unwillingness to get physically involved with the performances. On the other hand, Ulay and Abramovic never asked the audience to help them, to rescue them so the unwillingness to interact was mutual.

Furthermore, Abramovic and Ulay did not perform on stages, just another way that they sought to break down the barrier between themselves and the audience. Instead they performed in galleries and performance spaces in which the audience was on the same floor as they were and in immediate proximity. The question then arises; did audience members have an ethical responsibility to the performers? Only during Abramovic’s earlier solo career did audience members get involved, helping her out of potentially fatal situations. One such instance was during *Rhythm 5* in which two audience members pulled her out of the burning star after she had passed out due to lack of oxygen. Another instance was in *Rhythm 0* in

which she gave herself to an audience instructed to treat her as if she was any other object present. As was described in the introduction, over the course of the evening a group of art aficionados created a physical barrier between Abramovic and other members of the audience, shielding her from the increasing violence. She had given up all personal control over the situation. They saw this shield as necessary after someone pointed a loaded gun at her head and she remained unwavering in her resolve to present herself as an object without personal self-responsibility.

Performance artists cannot be studied in the same light as actors on a theatrical stage. Unlike a staged slap performed in a scripted play, when Ulay slaps Abramovic in *Light/Dark*, it is real. Dr. Colin Fernandes of the *American Pain Society* comments on Abramovic's work and writes, "[y]ou cannot comfort yourself in the fact that this is merely the verisimilitude of acting. Because the trauma and blood are real."<sup>cxix</sup> When watching the two artists, the audience members were in the presence of real pain and real violence yet did not act to change the situation. Instead they complacently watched the action unfold.

Audience members have been trained to feel that there is a barrier between the audience and the performer and to cross that line is to interfere with the artist at work. Roselee Goldberg visits upon the idea of breaking down this barrier in *Performance Art: From Futurism to the Present*. "[P]erformance was seen as reducing the element of alienation between the performer and viewer," she writes, "since both audience and performer experienced the work simultaneously."<sup>cxxii</sup> Because the performance was enacted, unmediated and unrehearsed in front of an audience, the audience experienced what the artists produced at the same time as

the artists did, thus creating a relationship between the audience and the artists that was based on mutual experiences. By experiencing the performance in real time, at the exact same time as the artists experienced it, there was no primacy given to either party. As discussed in the second chapter, Abramovic and Ulay never rehearsed their performances, so they too had little idea of how the performance would proceed. Both parties were theoretically equally oblivious to the outcome. Of course Ulay and Abramovic had a better idea of how it might end because it was they who designed the performance. Yet neither of the artists were in complete control, unable to definitively determine if or when the other would end the performance.

It is necessary to briefly return to the discussion of masochism and to re-quote Abramovic. "It is not the pain itself that matters. We never did things for the pleasure of pain. We were looking for a key, a way to break through the body, to open something up, which is a desire that comes from another side of truth or reality."<sup>cxix</sup> As Abramovic points out, their performances were not meant to be masochistic, but to open up new emotional possibilities for themselves and for the audience. It was to allow the audience a different life experience. This experience is something unique to performance art as opposed to other visual arts; the most successful artist can control the performance situation and the audience's state of awareness because she is in front of her audience and not secluded in a studio, removed from those who will ultimately view the piece as is the case with painting or sculpture. Abramovic insists that she can work off of the energy of her spectators, adding to the symbiotic relationship between herself and her audience.

However, she says, “that energy only happens if I am relating to the public; it doesn’t happen if I’m alone in my studio doing something by myself.”<sup>cxixiv</sup>

Because of their close proximity to the audience, the artists were able to both control and draw energy from the spectators’ presence thus continuing the reciprocal relationship between the audience and artists. Again, from the interview with Janet Kaplan, when asked about “pre-show jitters,” Abramovic replied, “the moment the public is there something happens. I move from the lower self into a higher state, you can push your body to do things you absolutely could never do.”<sup>cxixv</sup> Here Abramovic accentuated the necessity of the role of the spectator in her performances in creating the symbiotic relationship discussed above.

The most fundamental way the audience members interact with the performers is when the former figuratively replaces the artists’ body for his own. Peter Weibel said in 1978 “...both [the audience and the performers are] exposed to the beating. Because the exposed artist can be a substitute for the audience...” the audience member is transformed from a removed voyeur to a participant in the performance.<sup>cxixvi</sup> This quote brings up two important points: first, that the audience member becomes an active participant and second, that he can symbolically replace his own body for the artists’.

For Abramovic, the spectator is always inherently guilty of voyeurism, a passive onlooker without any desire to participate in the scene unfolding before him. In an interview with Delia Bajo and Brainard Carey of the Brooklyn Rail, she said, “[t]here is a passive situation where the public in most performances doesn’t take active participation and is a voyeur of the situation.”<sup>cxixvii</sup> Their voyeuristic

status is only supported further by their unwillingness to act as Ulay and Abramovic inflicted violence onto each other, as discussed above. By exposing their bodies Ulay and Abramovic allow the audience to relate to them as bodies capable of feelings similar to the audience's. The audience actively removes themselves from the situation of the voyeur. This empathetic relationship is similar to the above discussion of Merleau-Ponty and how one can know the other through understanding his experiences. Another consequence of Ulay and Abramovic's exposed, naked, bodies is the audience's inability to think of the artists as anything but real; exposing the body confirms, for the audience, its ontology.<sup>cxviii</sup> As a real body, an ethical audience member cannot see the artists as objects and thus they cannot ignore the verisimilitude of the events happening before them and how those events relate back to him. Still, as was mentioned above, the audience never ventured to remove the artists from situations they had made for themselves that were more than potentially dangerous.

A closer investigation of the way in which the audience relates to the performers is necessary. Looking at the pieces *Light/Dark* and *Expansion in Space* will help to clarify the ideas put forth in this chapter. *Light/Dark* was the performance in which the two sat on the floor, opposite each other, and slapped each other until Abramovic ended the piece by ducking to avoid Ulay's hand, and *Expansion in Space* was when the two repeatedly and violently collided with mobile columns at a running-speed. However difficult it is to empathize with the violence of *Light/Dark*, it is easy to identify with either Ulay or Abramovic as the person acted upon as being slapped is something most people have experienced. The two

artists set up a performance that was both simple and easily recognizable in order that the spectator could project his past experiences onto the artists', creating a new subjective experience that was distinctly his.

Since purposely running into a wall, much less in the nude, is a less familiar action, *Expansion in Space* was less relatable to the audience. The isolation of the artists pushed the audience to a voyeuristic position. Unlike *Light/Dark*, *Expansion in Space* could have been done without partnership, and although it creates an aesthetic mirror effect when the two, very similar-looking members of the opposite sex, perform the act simultaneously, it is more alienating and holds the audience at a distance. Max Kizloff writes of violent body art and the audience's relation to it when he says, "Empathy has been defined as the identification of the self with the other. But we never had to empathize, as we do now, with the physical violence that materializes art because it has become dramatized by the artist who plays the role of its victim."<sup>cxix</sup> Because the audience was now confronted by the violence this new style of performance, which left them feeling alienated, they were unable to empathize with the performers. Yet, similar to *Light/Dark*, *Expansion in Space* is exceedingly simple both in materials used and action. Because of this simplicity the audience member is more apt to understand the situation, to understand the significance and the pain of the two artists throwing their naked bodies at the mobile columns and able to look back at his own relatable experiences.

While the *Expansion in Space* potentially alienates the viewer, Abramovic describes it as being the first time she "experienced the energy force created in the space by the public," allowing her to continue for thirty minutes after Ulay had left



the performance and well beyond her self-declared physical limits.<sup>xxxx</sup> The audience allowed her to continue by not stopping her but also as providers of energy.

*Imponderabilia* is one of the only performances of Ulay and Abramovic's in which the spectator physically encounters the artists. This performance highlights the importance of interaction between the audience and the artists. During this performance the two artists stood on either side of the doorway leading into the gallery, completely naked. Audience members were then forced to slide into the gallery-space sideways, pressured to choose which naked body to face. Because of the physical proximity of the artists in this confined space, the audience members had to touch the artists. This was a dramatically different situation than what is thought to be a 'normal' interaction between artists and spectator. Not only were the audience members expected to touch the "object" – the interaction and energy created between Ulay, Abramovic, and the public – but in order to enter the gallery and exhibit it was required of them.

The interaction between the artists and audience is significant because it concretely highlights the topic of this thesis: touching in performance art. While the first two chapters concentrated on the concrete and physical relationship of Ulay and Abramovic, this last chapter's investigation of the nature between artist and spectator emphasized how the audience was able to imagine himself as one of the artists and was thus able to understand his relationship to them. By figuratively substituting his body for the artist's he experienced the alternate experience Ulay and Abramovic sought to give to their audience.

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- <sup>iv</sup> Marina Abramovic, *Artist Body Performances 1969-1998* (Milan: Edizioni Charta, 1998), 68-69.
- <sup>v</sup> Abramovic, *Artist Body*, 76-79.
- <sup>vi</sup> Abramovic, *Artist Body*, 80
- <sup>vii</sup> Abramovic, *Artist Body*, 16.
- <sup>viii</sup> Thomas McEvelley, "Great Wall Talk," in Abramovic, Marina and Ulay. *The Lovers, The Great Wall Walk. exh. cat.* (Amsterdam: Stedelijk Museum, 1989), 76.
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- <sup>xvi</sup> *Ibid*, 130.
- <sup>xvii</sup> Gilles Deleuze, *Masochism: Coldness and Cruelty*, trans Jean McNeil (New York: Zone Books, 1991), 74-75.
- <sup>xviii</sup> Abramovic, *Artist Body*, 158-161.
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- <sup>xx</sup> Kathy O'Dell, *Contract with the Skin: Masochism, Performance Art and the 1970s*, (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 1998), 2.
- <sup>xxi</sup> Abramovic, *Artist Body*, 148-149.
- <sup>xxii</sup> Abramovic, *Artist Body*, 174.
- <sup>xxiii</sup> Abramovic, *Artist Body*, 174-177.
- <sup>xxiv</sup> Abramovic, *Artists Body*, 150-157.
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<sup>xxvii</sup> Ulay, "Frank Uwe Laysiepen (Ulay)," *ALAMUT: Bastion of Peace and Information*, 10 June 2001  
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<sup>xxxv</sup> Manning, 69.

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<sup>xxxvii</sup> Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, 93.

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<sup>xl</sup> Manning, 137.

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## Chapter 2 Endnotes

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<sup>lx</sup> Richard von Krafft-Ebing, *Psychopathia Sexualis*, trans. Franklin S. Klaf (New York: Bell Publishing Company, Inc. 1965), 87.

<sup>lxi</sup> Sacher-Masoch, "Venus in Furs" in *Coldness and Cruelty*, 170.

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<sup>lxxii</sup> Reik, 206-208.

<sup>lxxiii</sup> Reik, 206.

<sup>lxxiv</sup> Reik, 206.

<sup>lxxv</sup> Reik, 208.

<sup>lxxvi</sup> Reik, 214.

<sup>lxxvii</sup> Reik, 223.

<sup>lxxviii</sup> Reik, 229.

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- <sup>xc</sup> Amelia Jones, "Rupture," *Parachute* no.123 (July / August / September 2006), 20.
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