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## The Aesthetics of Marina Abramović: In Conversation with the Artist

MARTA ROSA

«The Cleaner» was Italy's first major retrospective dedicated to Marina Abramović, hosted at Palazzo Strozzi in Florence from 21 September 2018 to 20 January 2019. The title of the exhibition refers to Abramović's reflection on her life, of which – as in a house – only the essential should be preserved and the rest should be “cleaned”. For this reason, with over one hundred pieces of work on display, this exhibition spans a half-century of activity from the matriarch of Performance Art, a woman that has revolutionized the very idea of this art with her personal and professional life over the last decades.

To mark this occasion, I had the opportunity to interview this great artist, who was born on the 30<sup>th</sup> November 1946 in Belgrade, during Tito's regime in SFR Yugoslavia. Her parents were Partisan war heroes who helped fight the Nazis in World War II and held high positions in the communist government. The artist remembers them as figures who were not very involved in her life, too strict and not at all loving. Likely for this reason, Abramović developed an iron self-discipline, which is evident in all of her performances; not to leave anything to chance she plans the performances to the very last detail, fully aware of the risks that they may involve and ready to face them without fear.

After her studies at the Academy of Fine Arts in Belgrade, in the early 1970s Abramović began her artistic career. With her first performances – such as «Rhythm Series» (1973-1974), «Thomas Lips» (1975), «Art Must Be Beautiful/Artist Must Be Beautiful» (1975), or «Freeing Series» (1975) – she tried to free the senses, transcend the limitations of the body, and achieve a higher sense of understanding. These performances also represented her definitive turn away from traditional media, such as painting or drawing, to a complete focus on the use of her own body as an art medium. When she was a student, Abramović worked intensely with painting, repeating almost

obsessively the same themes, such as violent head-on truck accidents or clouds that became geometrical shapes or faceless human figures. However, as soon as she discovered Performance Art, Abramović abandoned all other expressive forms and reached farther than any other artist...

When she decided to leave Belgrade, Abramović arrived in Amsterdam, where on the 30<sup>th</sup> November 1975 – the day of her 29<sup>th</sup> birthday – she met the German artist Ulay (Frank Uwe Laysiepen, who coincidentally was also born on the 30<sup>th</sup> November) with whom began a tormented romantic and professional relationship that would last twelve years. Abramović and Ulay claimed to be merged into a single hermaphrodite organism, and during this period, they travelled for three years across Europe in an iconic Citroën HY van, following the rules of their manifesto «Art Vital» (no fixed living-place; permanent movement; direct contact; local relation; self-selection; passing limitations; taking risks; mobile energy; no rehearsal; no predicted end; no repetition). The couple collaborated in a series of relational performances – such as «Relation in Space» (1976), «Relation in Time» (1977), «Imponderabilia» (1977), and «AAA-AAA» (1978) –, calling into question the socially defined identities of both femininity and masculinity, and encouraging viewers to participate through their own exploration of gender relationships. In the 1980s they took anthropological research trips in India, Thailand, China, Tibet, and the Australian outback to learn meditation practices. During this “spiritual period”, the artists conceived some of their most long-lasting performances, based on the exchange of looks and mental energy between them, such as in the series «Nightsea Crossing» (1981-1987), which the couple performed for seven hour periods over a total of 90 days in galleries throughout Europe, America and Australia. In 1988, with the performance «The Lovers», Abramović and Ulay separated at the Great Wall of China, however the end of this important artistic “marriage” meant, at the same time, a new beginning for the career of Marina Abramović.

Abramović was awarded the Golden Lion for Best Artist at the 1997 Venice Biennale for the

performance «Balkan Baroque», was a symbolic act of cleansing from the devastating war in Yugoslavia, a sort of requiem for her homeland, as well as a way of directly confronting death. During this performance, Abramović sat on a mountain of 1,500 cow bones, washing blood from them with a metal brush, continuously singing sad folk songs from her childhood.

In recent years Marina Abramović changed her *modus operandi*: she transformed her position and became the silent partner of an intimate and energetic dialogue with the audience. That is emblematically testified in 2010 by «The Artist Is Present» at the MoMA of New York. During this performance – which has already become a “classic” of Performance Art –, Abramović engaged in mutual gaze with more than one thousand strangers over the course of three months. Over 850,000 visitors came to see this extraordinary retrospective, and Abramović was inspired by the general public’s desire to engage with such immaterial works. Here is when her vision of MAI (Marina Abramović Institute for the Preservation of Performance Art) was born.

The philosophy of the Institute is to teach how it is possible to do Performance Art today, and how to safeguard it. Through the Abramović Method, a physical and mental practice that artists can use to produce a performance, and which consists in different exercises focused on breath, motion, stillness, and concentration, the Institute trains also the audience to attend long duration performances. The audience, in fact, plays a central role in this method, as without an audience a performance could not exist. The audience must learn to stay in the moment and be present in both time and space, only in this way can the performance “work” and transform people.

Performance Art is not only a transformative art, but also an extremely ephemeral artistic form. To maintain a performance, which could otherwise live only as archive documentation, Abramović invents and uses re-performance as a new artistic “strategy”. In this way, Abramović has laid the groundwork for going beyond the ephemeral in her work and reinventing the very idea of

performance in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Performed by new artists, performances of the past are no longer simply archive documentation, they take on a new second life and change with each performer, exactly as happens with different performances of a musical piece or a ballet, which can change radically from one performer to the next. According to Abramović's herself "a work must have its own life and survive its creator". This approach is evident in exhibitions such as the great «Seven Easy Pieces», presented at the Guggenheim Museum of New York in 2005, during which Abramović re-performed some of the most significant works of pioneers of Performance Art – Joseph Beuys's «How to Explain Pictures to a Dead Hare», Valie Export's «Action Pants: Genital Panic», Gina Pane's «The Conditioning: First Action of Self-Portraits(s)», Bruce Nauman's «Body Pressure», Vito Acconci's «Seed Bed», and her own performance «Lips of Thomas». More recently, in «The Cleaner» at Palazzo Strozzi in Florence, the live reinterpretation of Abramović's celebrated performances – «Freeing Series» (1975), «Imponderabilia» (1977), «Cleaning the Mirror» (1995), «Luminosity» (1997), and «The House with the Ocean View» (2002) – was entrusted to a group of performers specially selected and trained by Abramović's close assistants.

Furthermore, it should not be forgotten that Marina Abramović always gives value to the spiritual dimension of art. The energy that originates from her interactive performances, as well as from her «Transitory Objects», represents the aim of her work, which could be viewed as a "mission" and considered as a tool to radically transform our society and culture.

During the interview, Marina Abramović was in her home at Malden Bridge, New York State, which is known as the Star House for its six-pointed shape. It was 10 am (4 pm in the local Italian time zone) and she appeared very relaxed and answered my questions with a quiet tone of voice. With my interview I have tried to recall key moments of her artistic career, as well as to show the human aspects of the artist that has revolutionized the very idea of Performance Art.

**Marta Rosa: You are considered as a pioneer of Performance Art and you have defined yourself as the "grandmother" of this extraordinary and unique visual art. For this reason nobody better than you can try to give an answer to this question: what is Performance Art?**

Marina Abramović: Many people, who do Performance Art, can give this answer, and every answer will be very different, as each person has a different relationship with performance. I can only give my own answer. For me, performance is a mental and physical construction that you made at a specific time, in a specific space, in front of an audience, where an energy dialogue is going to happen. This is for me the performance. It is a live form of art and it is also a time-based art: you have to be there to perceive it.

**MR: In your early years, during the 70s, Performance Art started as an innovative, radical and exclusive form of art, based on immateriality of art, independent from the economic sphere and commodification. Do you believe that nowadays Performance Art maintains the same features or has its role inside contemporary society and the art scene changed?**

MA: I think performance now has a much better position than before. In the 70s, there was a situation of complete rebellion, performance was not accepted as a mainstream art and it was rejected by the general audience; there was only a very small audience following performance. But now, 30-40 years later, performance has become a very important part of art and there are more performance artists, installations, and mixed media in which performance was never before included. Now you have major museums showing Performance Art: this never would have happened in the 70s, the 80s, or even the 90s...

**MR: Spectators play an essential role in any performance, but their relationship with performers sometimes appears rather ambivalent and "contradictory". As you describe in your**

**memoir, «Walks Through Walls»<sup>1</sup>, during your performance «Rhythm 0»<sup>2</sup>, at Studio Morra in Naples in 1974, you realized that anyone from the audience could even try to kill you; at the same time over 850.000 people rushed from around the world to attend «The Artist is Present»<sup>3</sup>, your great retrospective at MoMA of New York. How do you explain this dual approach of cruelty and disregard on the one hand and deep admiration and affection on the other?**

MA: There were thirty-six years between these two performances, and I learnt very much over that period. In the first performance, «Rhythm 0», I could not talk to the public, they could do whatever they wanted to me and I gave them permission. The permission was very clear: seventy-six objects [according to the original instructions the objects were seventy-two] for pleasure and for violence that one can use on me as desired. So, I gave people the tools myself, letting them decide how they were going to use them, and I realized that

<sup>1</sup> Marina Abramović, «Walk Through Walls. A Memoir», Crown Archetype, New York, 2016.

<sup>2</sup> Marina Abramović, «Rhythm 0», performance, 6 hours, Studio Morra, Naples, 1974. Abramović's original intention for the piece is explained by her written instructions which accompanied the work: "Instructions: There are 72 objects on the table that one can use on me as desired. Performance: I am the object. During this period I take full responsibility. Duration: 6 hours (8pm–2am). Studio Morra, Naples, 1974". Thus, for a period of six hours, visitors were invited to use any of the objects on the table – such as a glass of water, a rose, a paper, a pair of scissors, a kitchen knife and a pistol with one bullet – on the artist, who subjected herself to their treatment. The result utterly shocked her and led her to realize how twisted and cruel humanity can be from within.

<sup>3</sup> Marina Abramović, «The Artist is Present», performance, 3 months, Museum of Modern Art, New York, 2010. During this performance – that represents a full-blown manifesto of Abramović's artistic work – for more than 700 hours, over a three-month period, Marina Abramović stared silently and without moving at 1,675 people who sat opposite her, focusing on the value of energy-based and spiritual communication between the artist and her audience.

the public can try to kill you. Thirty-six years later [during «The Artist is Present»], I gave the public completely different tools. I gave them just one chair and the instructions were very strict: sit on the chair, do not talk and just engage in a mutual gaze with me; the time is limitless, and you can stay there as long as you want. These were the only instructions. In one case, you lose the spirit of the public by giving them the ability to be violent and the potential to kill you, and in the other case, you elevate the spirit of the public when you give them different tools.

**MR: Analyzing your performances, I noticed a constant attempt to establish an energy exchange, an energy dialogue with the audience. That behavior seems to help people to face their fears, pains, and weaknesses and, possibly, to overcome them through direct participation in your performances. This practice reminds one – in a way – of the shamanic rituals. For this reason, I would like to ask you if you have ever felt as a modern “shaman”, a kind of alternative therapist who takes care of her “patients” through the energy of art.**

MA: I am very interested in shamanism, I study shamanism and I have also done lots of different retreats around the world to learn how I can use my body and also my mental powers, in order to create better performances, because performance is all about immateriality, so you have to project into the mind something that you have to feel. That is very difficult, because it is the “soft matter”, so you have to learn to perform with certain emotions. I study all this, but I am still an artist and I would never call myself a shaman. Shaman is a completely different category.

**MR: You have spent twelve years of your professional life with the artist Ulay. You have shared with him some of your most important performances, such as «Relation in Space»<sup>4</sup>,**

<sup>4</sup> Marina Abramović/Ulay, «Relation in Space», performance, 58 minutes, XXXVIII Biennale, Giudecca, Venice,

**«Imponderabilia»<sup>5</sup>, «Rest Energy»<sup>6</sup>, «Nightsea Crossing»<sup>7</sup>, and «The Lovers»<sup>8</sup> – the perfor-**

1976. This performance was the first from their «Relation Work» series, which was based on the analysis of the male/female principle. At the start of the compilation version of the video registration, Abramović explains the set-up of the performance: “Two bodies repeatedly pass, touching each other. At a high speed they collide.” Approaching each other from different sides of the space, Marina Abramović and Ulay collide with each other in the middle and then disappear from view. Sometimes they do not reappear for another twenty seconds before the process starts to repeat itself.

<sup>5</sup> Marina Abramović/Ulay, «Imponderabilia», performance, 90 minutes, Galleria Comunale d’Arte Moderna, Bologna, 1977. Marina Abramović and Ulay stood facing one another in a narrow passageway for 90 minutes, motionless and naked, forcing visitors wishing to enter the museum to pass between them. The performance was supposed to last six hours but the police put a stop to it.

<sup>6</sup> Marina Abramović/Ulay, «Rest Energy», performance for video, 4 minutes and 10 seconds, ROSC’80, Dublin, 1980. The performance was part of the «That Self» series and engaged with the first acceptance of performance, when understood as a body test that can lead to endangering life. Ulay held an arrowhead, which was pointing at Abramović’s heart, and microphones on their clothes picked up their quickening heartbeats and irregular breathing, creating a dense tension.

<sup>7</sup> Marina Abramović/Ulay, «Nightsea Crossing» (the first title of the performance was «Gold Found By the Artists», performance, 7 hours per day for 16 days, The Art Gallery of NSW, Sydney, 1981), performance, 90 days, various locations, 1981-1987. During this performance series the artists sat motionless, facing each other across a table specially designed using numerologically formulated proportions, for seven hour periods over a total of 90 days in galleries throughout Europe, America and Australia. The artists dressed in a particular color at each sitting, believing in the importance of color in relation to the day and its effect on the mental state. Objects were sometimes introduced onto the table (a live python, a pair of scissors). In 1983 a Tibetan Lama and a member of the Pintubi tribe from the Central Australian Desert were invited to take part in a special performance, entitled «Nightsea Crossing Conjunction», 4 days, 4 hours each day, Sonesta Koepelzaal, Museum Fodor, Amsterdam.

<sup>8</sup> Marina Abramović/Ulay, «The Lovers (The Great Wall Walk)», performance, 90 days, The Great Wall of China, 1988. Marina Abramović started the walk across the

**mance that celebrated the end of your romantic and professional relationship. What role did love play in your work during that period? And how did your “personal career” change?**

MA: Although this work is important, I do not believe that my most important performances are with Ulay, for the simple reason that this was only a twelve years period and I have been working for half a century. In this half a century I think «Balkan Baroque»<sup>9</sup> is a very important performance, for which I got the Lion; I also think the piece «At the Waterfall»<sup>10</sup>, which was work done with the Tibetan monks, is very important. «The Artist is Present» is also extremely important.

I think that my career has an early period before Ulay, twelve years with Ulay, and then all the rest of the time without; and you can clearly see that through the retrospective in Florence of my 50 years of work, in which I show a lot of

Great Wall of China in Liaoning Province and proceeded westwards along coastal areas, flatlands and highlands. Ulay proceeded eastwards through the Western Periphery of the Gobi desert and the Helan Shan mountains in Ningxai province. A Chinese support team provided both with food and water during the journey, at two weeks intervals. The performance concluded at the meeting of Marina and Ulay, which meant, at the same time, the end of their romantic and professional relationship of twelve years.

<sup>9</sup> Marina Abramović, «Balkan Baroque», performance, 4 days and 6 hours, XLVII Biennale, Venice, 1997, which earned Marina Abramović the Golden Lion for Best Artist.

<sup>10</sup> «At the Waterfall» (2003) is a video projection of 108 images, each showing a Tibetan monk or nun, chanting in meditative abandon. A “waterfall” of sound pervades the space. The work was commissioned by representatives of the Dhali Lama who assigned Marina Abramović to choreograph the Tibetan monks for their performance in the sacred music festival in Bengalor, India. She spent one month in a Tibetan monastery and recorded the monks and nuns for the work, which designates a continuation of the artist’s commitment to Eastern philosophies, tied to the hope of an eventual integration into Western society. The installation is an overwhelming environment of sounds and images and is likely to put almost any visitor under a hypnotic spell.

works from different periods. I think that the work continually develops, there are certain things from the 70s that I would never do today. Everything is developing and changing, and there is still so much more work to be done.

It is really interesting how the public reacts, especially women. They really love the period with Ulay, because it embodies a love story. This is such a sentimental approach. We go to the Great Wall of China, and there we split, and then we say goodbye, and then we cry, and then he comes back... lots of these kinds of stories sometimes is overly emotional and unnecessary. That does not really deal with the concept of art.

**MR: In recent years you put particular effort into the teaching and “safeguarding” of Performance Art (I am thinking here of the Marina Abramović Institute and the Abramović Method)<sup>11</sup>: why did you feel the need to do this?**

MA: When you have this amount of people in MoMA, you understand that your role has changed. It is not just the role of an artist working, it is the role of somebody who has to bring different ideas to society, and I felt that one of my responsibilities – because I always believed that artists should be servants of society – is to bring these ideas and see how to reflect the problems of today, of people who cannot concentrate on anything, people taking selfies and photos of everything they see without experiencing it. I was looking to this whole thing and I said ok, in order to see the art and listen to the music we need a different approach to media and technology. For this reason, the Abramović Method is really going

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<sup>11</sup> The Marina Abramović Institute (MAI) was founded in 2010 for the preservation of performance works by herself and others. The Institute expands the accessibility of time-based art work, creates new possibilities for collaboration among thinkers of all fields, and is home to the Abramović Method, which is a public participatory event joining people in a communal experience to connect with oneself and with each other, and to engage fully in physically and mentally demanding works (see more at <https://mai.art/about-mai>, 2018).

back to simplicity and teaching people to live themselves again.

**MR: In this context you have coined and spread the concept of “re-performance”, which seems to have a deep connection with theatre and its artistic way of working, as testified, for example, by «Seven Easy Pieces»<sup>12</sup>, presented at the Guggenheim Museum of New York in 2005, and your retrospective «The Cleaner», currently hosted at Palazzo Strozzi in Florence. Is there a difference between a re-performance and a theatrical performance? And do you believe that the essence of an original performance can be totally maintained through its reproduction?**

MA: The answer is very simple. Take Bach, who is dead now and can never play his music again, as he simply does not exist anymore. If you have twenty-five pianists, and of these twenty-five pianists, twenty-four play really shitty Bach, there is no essence of Bach at all, and then you get one who plays like the master, who brings his own charisma, brings his own talent, and not only plays Bach, but also gives something extra, which is his own self. It is the same with performance, you can have bad interpretations or a sublime one, and when you have the sublime one it is fine! This is what Martha Graham<sup>13</sup> did. The audience

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<sup>12</sup> Marina Abramović, «Seven Easy Pieces», performance, 7 days, Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, New York, 2005. The event was part of the Performance Art Festival, which is led by the non-profit art organization «Performa» directed by RoseLee Goldberg. In this performance series Marina Abramović re-performed six of the most “difficult” and historically significant performances from the 1970s: Joseph Beuys’s «How to Explain Pictures to a Dead Hare», Valie Export’s «Action Pants: Genital Panic», Gina Pane’s «The Conditioning: First Action of Self-Portraits(s)», Bruce Nauman’s «Body Pressure», Vito Acconci’s «Seed Bed», and her own performance «Lips of Thomas». For the occasion, the artist realized a new performance, entitled «Entering the Other Side», during which she was on a stage placed at the center of the Guggenheim Museum, wearing a huge blue dress and looking around earnestly in every direction.

<sup>13</sup> Martha Graham was an American modern dancer

would never get to know her work if it is not re-performed now. I think there is nothing different between dance and performance: they have to be revisited and they have to be re-performed, and the only problem is who is doing it. Right now in Palazzo Strozzi there will be an artist who is re-performing «The House with the Ocean View»<sup>14</sup>, which is an extremely difficult performance. I am going there for the closing day to support this event, because the performer is going to be in the structure for twelve days, in total silence and without eating. It is very, very hard! And if you do that, you really change. It is not theatre in any way. It is real, true and a hardcore performance.

Right now, I just came back from Bangkok with my Institute, that is teaching young performance artists from Asia how to perform their own works. They were performing eight hours a day for fifteen days, which they never would have done, but we prepared them for that. They are such amazing artists, we had 72.000 visitors yesterday – that was the closing day – which is an amazing record for seeing young Asian performance artists, which has nothing to do with my work, it has just to do with the Institute. I really support performance as an important transformative tool of today's art practice.

**MR: Now that you have reached this point of your artistic path, what are your expectations and plans for the future?**

MA: For me the future is always so much work. Right now I am preparing work for the

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and choreographer. Her style, the «Graham technique», reshaped American dance and is still taught worldwide.

<sup>14</sup> Marina Abramović, «The House with the Ocean View», performance, 12 days, performed for the first time at Sean Kelly Gallery, New York, 2002. The artist spent twelve whole days in total silence and without eating inside a suspended structure connected to the ground by a ladder whose rungs had been replaced by sharp blades. Visitors could watch her sleeping, showering or using the toilet. This work was presented, as re-performance, from Tuesday 4 December 2018 through to Sunday 16 December 2018, during the exhibition «The Cleaner» at Palazzo Strozzi (Marina Abramović was present for the closing day).

Royal Academy of Arts show, that is going to be in 2020, and it is a quite different work, about which I cannot talk because I am going to present it for the first time there. And then I am also going to direct and play in my opera called «Seven Deaths»<sup>15</sup>, dedicated to Maria Callas. And a-part from this, the Institute has his own structure and people, who I sometimes supervise, and with whom I have lots of meetings to see where we could go next, because the Institute is «moveable». In short, we just go there and try to create situations. I am also working in different books: one book is with Ulay, which is based on our memories in our life together, which is coming, probably, next year, on our birthdays<sup>16</sup>; I just finished the book of interviews<sup>17</sup>, which was published for Palazzo Strozzi. So, lots of work. It never stops (laughs)!

**MR: You asked the legendary Bob Wilson<sup>18</sup> to direct for you a great theatrical performance «The Life and Death of Marina Abramović»<sup>19</sup>,**

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<sup>15</sup> Marina Abramović will direct the production, which was originally conceived as a cinematic tribute to her life-long hero Maria Callas. «Seven Deaths» is due to debut at the Munich Opera House in 2020, with plans for it to tour to Covent Garden in London. The project will see Abramović play Maria Callas dying in seven operas including «Madame Butterfly», who stabbed herself, and «Tosca», who jumped to her death from a parapet.

<sup>16</sup> Each November 30<sup>th</sup> Marina Abramović and Ulay made a special performance to mark the significance of this day, their respective birthdays.

<sup>17</sup> The book «Marina Abramović. Interviews 1976-2018» (Abramović LLC, New York, 2018) is published in conjunction with the exhibition «Marina Abramović: The Cleaner», Palazzo Strozzi, Florence, September 20, 2018 – January 20, 2019.

<sup>18</sup> Robert Wilson is an American experimental theater stage director and playwright. Since the late 1960s, Robert Wilson's productions have decisively shaped the look of theater and opera. Through his signature use of light, his investigations into the structure of a simple movement, and the classical rigor of his scenic and furniture design, Wilson has continuously articulated the force and originality of his vision.

<sup>19</sup> «The Life and Death of Marina Abramović», theater performance directed by Robert Wilson, premiered on

**presented in 2011 in the occasion of the Manchester International Festival. With this epic mise-en-scene you want to tell the story of your life, but also of your death. For this reason I would like to conclude my interview with a question that may seem a bit “dark”, but that constitutes a question that any philosopher – as I think you are – has to face: what is your relation with death?**

MA: Friendly (laughs). My relation with death is friendly. I am afraid of it like everybody else, but at the same time I try to think about it, every day, so it becomes part of my life. I always say my manifesto: “My biggest dream is to die without fear, consciously and without anger”. If I succeed that, I am just going through this passage, because death is something that everybody has to go through. There is no anybody, any living thing in this planet, through plants, animals or human beings, that are not going to that point. It is better to face it and to be ready than to try to avoid it and think it is never going to happen. This is the best you can do.

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July 9, 2011 at the Manchester International Festival, The Lowry, Manchester, United Kingdom. At the intersection of theater, opera and visual art, Robert Wilson’s reimagining of performance artist Marina Abramović’s extraordinary life and work begins with her difficult childhood in former Yugoslavia, and chronicles her journey to the present day. Abramović, who plays herself as well as her imposing mother, is joined by world-renowned actor Willem Dafoe and singer Antony, performing original music and songs created for this “quasi opera”.