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Eating an Onion. Notes on Marina Abramović

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Abstract. *The Onion* is a 1995 video performance by Marina Abramović. The essay aims at analyzing some central themes of the artist's path, taking this work as reference text. First of all, by including the artist in the process of dissolution of beauty marking the art of the Twentieth century and regarding performance art as one of the outcomes of this process inaugurated by the avant-gardes. Secondly, by showing the link between the political dimension (in this particular case, the war in Yugoslavia in the 1990s) and an existential reflection focused on the role of the artist and the woman in the contemporary world.

Keywords. Marina Abramović, Yugoslavia, performance art, beauty.

Apparently nothing may bond together an American university campus and a small town in eastern Bosnia. But if we could give this nothing a date, we would be given a clue and also probably a meaning. In 1995, Marina Abramović is guest for three months at the University of Arlington and she is working on a video performance. During the summer of 1995 in Srebrenica the most atrocious act of the war between Serbia and Bosnia is consumed, namely the extermination of eight thousand Bosnians by the hand of the Bosnian Serb Army. Filed under “massacre”, “slaughter” or “genocide”, the stain of Srebrenica, symbol of the Yugoslavian catastrophe of the Nineties, almost seems to mirror itself in the performance by the Serbian author staged in Texas in the February of the same year: *The Onion*.

The Onion is a work of art falling within the artist's ten-year spanning reflection on the Yugoslavian tragedy and on the revisiting of her own past together with *Delusional* (1994), *Cleaning the Mirror* (1995), *Balkan Baroque* (1997), *The Hero* (2001), *Count on Us* (2004), *Balkan Erotic Epic* (2005). Performances, videos, works that probably compose the most incisive portrait of the Balkan crisis and in which Abramović records at the same time the existential discomfort of the private dimension and the ultimate, final political disintegration of a people or, better said, several ones. Notwithstanding their ambiguity, ambivalence and their melodramatic tone (Pejić

[2017]: 242-251), the result of the gaze of the (voluntary) exile's eye casts on her native country – Abramović will leave Belgrade during the mid-Seventies – this decade's performances today represent a transitional phase within the artist's path and, on balance, a dialectic moment necessary to the elaboration of a collective mourning. A huge psychoanalytic setting which *The Onion*, as we will see, boosts to the highest degree. After the totally autonomous beginnings in the first half of the Seventies, after the long-termed collaboration with her partner Ulay (1976-1988), the Balkan cycle, with its sour contraposition of political and private, represents the transition to the phase, still ongoing, in which Abramović's work seems to find its own sense in the shared performance, as shown by the, somehow decisive, performance staged in 2010, *The Artist is Present*. And it is interesting, not to say crucial, to notice the change of the audience's behavior during these stages. Let just compare the aggressive and perplexed participation of the public, for example, in *Rhythm 0* (1975) and the accommodating one, even smug, at times, in *The Artist is Present* (2010). Behaviors, almost at opposites, mirroring themselves in the artist's very status: an unknown performer on her debut and a celebrated star artist of the contemporary scene. This leads us back to the main question framing the whole of performative art and that of Abramović in particular: «Which rule should the audience apply in Abramović's performance?» (Fischer-Lichte [2004]: 12).

DISSECTING BEAUTY

And yet, such long artistic story, today at times mythologized, belongs to a broader that for the performance art stays as the unavoidable landing, if not final, at least hardly surpassable. And therefore, the need for a wider perspective separating itself from the happenings directly related to performance art is mandatory. The perspective we are referring to is the history of the deconstruction of the mimetic and of its main fetishism, beauty. The story that, started by the avant-gardes, will trans-

form art into existential and political practice, at least for a long part of the Nineteenth century, and the artistic gesture (that of representation) into performative act. From the Dadaist happenings to the performance art we attend to an uninterrupted autopsy of the Beautiful. It is a process that has found in the distinction between aesthetics and artistic beauty the last trench where to preserve, and perhaps to safeguard, the role of beauty, a role apparently not easy to dismiss. A distinction that, elaborated almost as a manifesto of Modernism by Roger Fry – «the apparent contradiction between two distinct uses of the word beauty, one for that which has sensuous charm, and one for the aesthetic approval of work of imaginative art where the objects presented to us are often of extreme ugliness» (Fry [1909]: 20) – will be resumed and updated by Arthur Danto, in his book of 2003 *The Abuse of Beauty*: «to distinguish between aesthetic beauty and what we might call artistic beauty. It is aesthetic beauty that is discerned through senses. Artistic beauty requires discernment and critical intelligence» (Danto [2003]: 92).

It is well known that beauty is precisely the great problem of Twentieth-century art, or as the unbearable burden of the classical tradition or the object of kitsch fetishization on the part of the bourgeoisie and later of the mass consumption. Stated the impossibility to give an exhaustive account here, we can, however, provide two programmatically extreme examples of this rejection, symbolically summarized in the image of the Parthenon. So Picasso said in 1935: «The beauties of the Parthenon, Venuses, Nymphs, Narcissuses are so many lies. Art is not the application of a canon of beauty but what the instinct and the brain can conceive beyond any canon» (Picasso [1935]: 271). And Julian Beck, right after *Paradise Now*, could affirm in name of the Living Theatre: «The Parthenon? Its geometry? Its splendor? Beauty and philosophy are not enough» (Beck [1972]: 71). Thus, the title Abramović chose for her performance of 1975 *Art Must Be Beautiful, Artist Must Be Beautiful* remains, apparently, surprising. The performance, executed in Copenhagen and recorded in a video, is so simple as much as incisive. Abramović

sits naked in front of the public for one hour, forcibly combing and ripping her hair, while wounding herself in the face. The whole act is accompanied by a relentlessly repeated sentence: «Art must be beautiful. Artist must be beautiful». Two levels overlap and the least explicit one is suggested just by Abramović: the evident aesthetic offence, in fact, goes hand in hand with a political dimension. A young nude woman combs her black hair: exercise of seduction and pure rituality of the female beauty. The artist herself underlines the initial sensuality of the gesture: the artist must be beautiful too. But the performance quickly turns this set of plain sexual appeal into its exact opposite. By evoking beauty *ad libitum* hence depriving the word of its sense, the hairbrush does not comb anymore, it tears the hair off, while injuring the skin. The audience, at first enmeshed and now disturbed, if not disgusted, seems to refuse the promise of beauty previously offered by that young body.

The piece was profoundly ironic. Yugoslavia had made me so fed up with the aesthetic presumption that art must be beautiful. Friends of my family would have paintings that matched the carpet and the furniture – I thought all this decorativeness was bullshit. When it came to art, I only cared about content: what a work meant. The whole point of Art Must Be Beautiful, Artist Must Be Beautiful was to destroy that image of beauty. Because I had come to believe that art must be disturbing, art must ask questions, art must predict the future. If art is just political, it becomes like newspaper. It can be used once, and the next day it's yesterday's news. Only layers of meaning can give long life to art – that way, society takes what it needs from the work over time. (Abramović [2016]: 79-80)

The comment Abramović gave to *Art Must Be Beautiful, Artist Must Be Beautiful* could not have been more linear. However, there are a few things that must be underlined. The refusal of the codified and stereotyped taste, eloquently identified with that one of the socialist Yugoslavia, that is the idea of the beautiful as decorative, a window-dressing of social expendability (the furniture in

bourgeoisie's houses in Belgrade, the class the artist's family belongs to). An aesthetic experience, that one of kitsch, which as a transversal grammar of the Twentieth-century taste – the well-known idea by Greenberg of kitsch as a «universal literacy» (Greenberg [1939]: 9) tying together the tastes of the American clerk, the Nazi hierarch and the Russian peasant – is circumscribed by Abramović to her own reality, almost bringing out the «melodramatic» conviction, as Bojana Pejić would say, that a universal content (what art should be, as the artist herself suggests) may only arise from one's own personal, family experience. The Yugoslavia of her youth displays the target to hit. But in order to «destroy that image of beauty», art must transcend its own journalistic dimension, that of a mere commentary of the present time. History must replace the chronicle, just like the personal experience must turn into the public, if not political, domain. And only an art capable of developing its own meanings («layers of meaning») can achieve such project which is totally inner to the Twentieth-century art: and the layers, here metaphorically evoked, are going to be exposed in a literal way by the image of a bulbous plant in layers, an onion, almost twenty years later.

But not only art must be beautiful thanks to the beauty finding a new form in the conflict and in the critical tension, and not in the gratification of pleasure: the artist too must be beautiful. And it is this perspective, centered on subjectivity, that is developed by Abramović in one of her less celebrated although perhaps most disturbing and problematic works (Novakov [2003]: 31-35), still of 1975: *Role Exchange*. Moving away from a performance hinged on physical suffering (Richards [2010]: 14), *Role Exchange* explores the nullification of one's own identity through the commodification of the self. The exchange is very simple: a Dutch prostitute (S. J.) would replace Abramović at the opening of an exhibition at the De Appel Arts Center in Amsterdam, while the artist would replace the prostitute for four hours in her window in the Red Light District: to the embarrassment of the prostitute, suddenly fell into the world of contemporary art, the artist's

observation replies as follows: «I was sitting there with everyone looking at me, violently crushing my ego down to zero» (Novakov [2003]: 32)». Extreme assumption of the equation between art and prostitution – already announced by Baudelaire in his famous motto «What is Art? Prostitution» – *Role Exchange* exposes the other dark side of the beauty in *Art Must Be Beautiful, Artist Must Be Beautiful*. The idea of a beauty capable of being merchandised is always complementary to a codified beauty. But if in the previous performance Abramović was only seen by the public as an artist, in *Role Exchange* her identity is conveyed by the eyes of customers: to assume the role of the most socially condemned practice also means to exhibit, by contrast, the status of the contemporary artist, seller of himself. It is not known whether the still voyeuristic borders of *Art Must Be Beautiful*, were surpassed in *Role Exchange* and to what extent the equation between art and prostitution was realized. Ulay (who – hidden in a vehicle in front of the window – took pictures of Abramović to record the performance) said that the curtains were lowered a couple of times, probably alluding to real intercourses (Richards [2010]: 16), while the artist declared that only three men approached without any sexual encounter taking place (Novakov [2003]: 35).

The two performances clearly show the negative value taken by beauty in the contemporaneity: kitsch ideology or instrument of absolute commodification. And yet, at the same time, they exhibit its character of challenge and utopia. Destroying beauty, consumed and hypostatized as commodity and fetish, means to think to a new possibility, because art must be beautiful and it is in this obligation, perhaps in this contradiction, that beauty becomes a task to be achieved rather than an established value. These are questions rather than answers, as Abramović recalled while commenting *Art Must Be Beautiful, Artist Must Be Beautiful*. This means to take a full responsibility for one's own social role, as the alienating experience of *Role Exchange* showed. We see the unavoidable overlapping of the exploration of aesthetic possibilities with the dimension of ethical

conflict. A tension that can be fully traced in the words, almost a testament, that Julian Beck transcribed in Rome on November 3, 1982, three years before his death, and which can be taken as a conclusive synthesis of that great process of dissecting beauty the art of the Twentieth-century was:

Morality and beauty are identical. Plato, The Republic. That is why the definition of beauty is so important, we have to know what is beautiful. Then how to attain it. And how not to confuse the mask of beauty with the entity. Keats dwells on truth, and it rings a bell, but truth like beauty needs constant definition and redefinition. What we think is truth may not be truth. What we taught was true in other times and in other times, we know now is not the truth. [...] The world is not flat, and Aristotle is not infallible. (Beck [1992]: 76)

BITING AND CRYING

Yugoslavia has always been present in Abramović's work: mother, stepmother, homeland, always repudiated (in the choice of voluntary exile) and always accepted (in the exploration of its origin). It is an immense wound, as proven by the five-pointed star that the artist cuts into her belly in that which remains her most complex performance, probably the most memorable and actually the most complete manifesto of all her art (Fischer-Lichte [2004]): *Lips of Thomas* (again in the fatidic 1975). Engraving the five-pointed star of the Socialist Republic of Yugoslavia with a razor blade on her belly. The five-pointed star had already appeared, threatening and funerary, the year before in the performance *Rhythm 5* (the number indicates exactly those five spikes) in Belgrade, at the SKC (Student Cultural Center), where the artist set fire to the edges of the star, made with wood shavings, and then laid herself down in the empty space in the center. Only the intervention of two spectators could prevent the artist, who had lost consciousness due to lack of oxygen, from getting burned. The centrality of a star: the star at the center of the artist's body, engraved in blood, or the artist at the heart of

a star on fire. «Why a star? It was the symbol of Communism, the repressive force under which I had grown up, the thing I was trying to escape – but it was so many other things, too: a pentagram, an icon worshiped and mystified by ancient religions and cults, a shape possessing enormous symbolic power. I was trying to understand the deeper meaning of these symbols by using them in my work». (Abramović [2016]: 65). The star will have a comeback in 2004 in *Count on Us*, a final confrontation with the post-war Yugoslavia.

While in these early works Yugoslavia is a metal phantom, the razor of *Lips of Thomas*, or one made of fire, namely the flames of *Rhythm 5*, the scenario of a political and existential repression, in the works of the Nineties it turns into an immense showdown. For Abramović, the answer to the tragedy of the war of the Nineties takes on the shape of a problematic primary scene. The disintegration of Yugoslavia, which the parents, heroes of the partisan resistance, had contributed to found, is not only the definitive confrontation with her own family, but also an unsettled meditation on how art and history might intertwine defining the identity of an individual. *The Onion* is this place of collective and private unconscious, of history and subjectivity. The explicit symbolism of the star is now replaced by the less disturbing, but also less readable, image of an onion.

Drawing inspiration from a fragment of the theatrical performance of the previous year (*Delusional*), in 1995, in Texas, Abramović stages the video performance *The Onion*: «I was shot against a bright-blue-sky background, wearing bright-red lipstick and nail polish, while I ate an entire onion (just as in *Delusional*) and complained about my life. As I complained, I gazed heavenward, like the Madonna suffering. And since I was eating a raw onion, with the skin, the tears streamed down my face» (Abramović [2016]: 229). As we look at a minimal scene, a woman biting an onion, we also hear a voice off, the voice of the artist marking the litany of her own lament.

I am tired of changing planes so often. Waiting in the waiting rooms, bus stations, train stations, airports.

I am tired of waiting for endless passport controls. Fast shopping in shopping malls. I am tired of more career decisions, museum and gallery openings, endless receptions, standing around with a glass of plain water, pretending that I am interested in conversation. I am tired of my migraine attacks, lonely hotel rooms, room service, long-distance telephone calls, bad TV movies. I am tired of always falling in love with the wrong man. I am tired of being ashamed of my nose being too big, of my ass being too large, ashamed of the war in Yugoslavia. I want to go away, somewhere so far that I am unreachable by fax or telephone. I want to get old, really old so that nothing matters any more. I want to understand and see clearly what is behind all this. I want to not want anymore. (Abramović [2016]: 229).

In her autobiography *Walk Through Walls* Abramović has strongly claimed the importance of this work. As an existential balance of a mid-life crisis and, in its own way, a work summarizing her own path, *The Onion* shows the inseparability of what we see, the act of eating an onion, and what we listen to, the scanning of a lament. If the star was an obvious (perhaps too much?) symbol, why to opt for an onion? Obviously eating an onion is an unequivocal physical gesture, experienced by everyone, in which taste is quickly transformed into disgust, a disgust that is easily shared by the viewer. A strategy, therefore, perfectly internal to the logic of performance art: to what extent can one bear the disgust? But this physical and bodily perspective immediately dissolves, to an attentive eye, into the interpretative effort. The layers of the onion seem to allude to the layers of life, to those socio-cultural masks (Richards [2010]: 29) with which the ego conceals its own identity and which, in the lament, express themselves in the hypocrisy of the art world, in the never-ending journeys, in a worldly exposition that is barely capable of masking the voids of existence. The onion does not have a bulb, it have neither a core nor a centre: layer by layer we arrive to the nothing. As *Role Exchange* questioned Abramović's role as a woman and an artist, *The Onion* now digs into the fragile, if not artificial, construction itself of the personal identity and, more broadly, the

whole Yugoslavian national identity. Each layer of the onion could also recall the several nationalities composing that Yugoslavia which at this time, in 1995, had discovered the absence of a bulb, an absence that Abramović made break in the most unexpected and assertive way by the text: «ashamed of the war in Yugoslavia».

The unavoidable weeping caused by the onion, the physical cry, turns into the weeping of a mourning, the spiritual cry. In Abramović's words also beauty dies, that beauty evoked as the duty of an artist twenty years earlier and which is also that one of a woman who now sees herself grown old and fading («ashamed of my nose being too big, of my ass being too large»). The onion, fruit of the ground (Yugoslavia), can only produce tears for a land that is dying. A food that does not produce life, but evokes loss, a bulimia that gets the nothing.

Although they are distant and alien to Abramović's path, we might recall two works that significantly link death to the act of nourishment or to food. In 1962 the pop artist Robert Indiana composes the diptych *EAT/DIE*. An obvious accusation to the ideology of consumption, if we remain in the context of Pop Art, but which takes on different contours if we broaden our gaze to the artist's biography: the binomial eat/die is in fact a private cipher expressing Indiana's childhood traumas. Maybe it was because of «the outlays of food connected with family funerals», maybe for the fact that «eat was the last word spoken by Carmen [Indiana's mother] on her deathbed» or also because in family portraits the artist's mother is always dressed in red, the color of *EAT*, while the father in dark gray, the other part of the diptych, *DIE*, is black (Ryan [2000]: 182). By the end of 1963, Indiana was a protagonist in *Eat*, a short film by Warhol, a twenty-minute shot featuring Indiana eating a mushroom. Just like in *The Onion*, the subject is filmed while he is in the act of eating. If the onion directly evokes disgust, but also the stratification of existence, in Warhol's *Eat* the mushroom, a tasty but also poisonous food, recalls two unexpected dimensions: the collective fear of the nuclear mushroom, extensively wide-

spread in America during the early Sixties, and the childhood of Indiana who loved to pick mushrooms to give to her mother who loved them very much. The woman, regardless of their potential danger, used to simply cook and eat them. A habit that would be echoed in her last sentence on the verge of death: «Did you have something to eat?» (Ryan [2000]: 187).

Complementary to *EAT/DIE* by Indiana there was another work belonging to Pop Art, *Tunafish Disaster* by Warhol of 1963. Part of the more appraised Warhol cycle, *Death and Disaster*, the painting resumes the pictures of an article appeared on "Newsweek" on April 1st 1963. Two housewives from Detroit had died by poisoning after having eaten rotten tuna. The photos of the two anonymous women (Mrs. McCarthy and Mrs. Brown), and of the poisoned can, spookily summarize the other side of that food industrialization exposed in the 1962 cycle, *Campbell's Soup Cans*. If Abramović's onion discovers its own nothingness layer by layer, if the individual or national identity is just an unstable and fictitious construction, Warhol's little can reveals the void behind the packaging. Yet another mystifying mask. Even food has its own deadline, nothing escapes the law of time. Everything is perishable, human beings and industrial products.

BEAUTY AND WAR

An emblem of death and loss, Abramović's onion possibly reveals an even deeper penitence. It takes us back to the decisive moments of Western culture. It is the oblique reference to the forbidden fruit of a never known Eden, but also the opaque reference to the beginning of all wars, of which the Yugoslavian one, in 1995, is but a more recent variant. It is the reference to the golden apple of discord, the moment when Eris threw the fruit at the wedding banquet of Pelus and Thetis, so opening the dispute on who was the most beautiful goddess. We know from the myth that when Paris chose beauty – Aphrodite promised, if she had been chosen, to give Paris the most

beautiful woman in the world – he also chose, unknowingly, the war, the Troy war, that is, the future destruction of his homeland. The beauty that Abramović invoked in 1975, one capable of unhinging the established order of social reality, becoming a faithful adept of the teaching of the Twentieth-century avant-gardes, also recalls another work leading from history to myth: *Balkan Erotic Epic* of 2005. Eroticism as an archaic ritual force. A video installation that shows Balkan peasants engaged in rituals for the fertility of the land. Men copulating with the soil and women exposing their vaginas to the rain, an obvious symbol of the seminal fluid. A Dionysian dimension that brings us back to the heart of a 1931 short novel by Ivo Andrić, *Anika's Times*, in which the beauty of a woman shocks Višegrad, a small town, a *kasaba*, in Bosnia, seducing the entire male population. Only the killing of Anika, a female Dionysus, will restore order.

Anika's death changed Višegrad, as it had to. The speed with which everything was restored to the old rhythm was indeed almost hard to believe. No one was curious to know where the woman had come from, why she had lived, and what she had wanted. She was harmful and dangerous, and now she was dead, buried, and forgotten. The kasaba, which had been momentarily deranged, could again sleep peacefully, walk freely, and breathe regularly. If a similar blight should occur – and it will at some point – the kasaba will again resist it, succumb to it, struggle against it, break it, bury it, and forget it. (Andrić [1931]: 439).

The repression of beauty is always the safest way to reaffirm power as Andrić seems to suggest and as Abramović would have stated decades later in her exploration of a beauty beyond any restriction of which the five-pointed star is the never dismissed synthesis. But all this has a price. And if identifying Anika with Abramović can be excessive and somewhat rushing, falling into the easy Western cliché of the wild and sensual, if not sexualized, Balkan woman (Pejić [2017]) – after all, is not the panther woman of *Cat People* (1942) the Serbian Irina Drubovna? – or subtly mythologizing,

as always happens when a person is compared to a literary character, *The Onion* still shows a truth of its own. Does not the act of eating an onion in the midst of a war reintroduce the idea expressed by Eliot that true poetry, and therefore art as a whole, lights up only by the moment in which the utmost individual touches the universal? In 1942 Eliot was asked to write a poem to be included in a collection remarkably entitled *London Calling*. These are the last two stanzas of that poem written under commission, “A Note on War Poetry”.

*War is not a life: it is a situation;
One which may neither be ignored nor accepted,
A problem to be met with ambush and stratagem,
Enveloped or scattered.*

*The enduring is not a substitute for the transient,
Neither one for the other. But the abstract conception
Of private experience at its greatest intensity
Becoming universal, which we call “poetry”,
May be affirmed in verse. (Eliot [1942]: 215-216).*

It is probably with these words that we may think, as if they would belong to the same story, and they do indeed, an American university campus where a woman bites an onion and cries while lamenting, and a small town in oriental Bosnia where eight thousand people get murdered.

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