Moving Dangers: Motion, Danger and the Queer Body in Performance
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“Moving Dangers: Motion, Danger, and the Queer Body in Performance” is a transdisciplinary analysis of The Artist is Absent, an exhibition of Marina Abramović reperformances at 25 CPW Gallery in New York, presented as a queer alternative to the Museum of Modern Art’s 2010 retrospective The Artist is Present. Unlike MoMA, 25 CPW featured live re-enactments of Abramović’s movement pieces, including some of her more physically dangerous stunts. By contrast, the MoMA retrospective relegated these works to video documentation, sculptural installations, or archival photography. In my paper I am interested in pursuing questions about movement and danger; how a body’s mobility across space (and specifically the gallery space) entices risk inherently, and under what conditions; and how the specificity of the gallery site might bring these dangers to the fore. I analyze in detail four key works presented at 25 CPW (Imponderabilia; Breathing in/Breathing out; Relation in Space; and Rhythm 10) and consider how these reperformances use physical movement and/or mobility across space to produce risk and danger through a queer aesthetics of the performer’s body.

Introduction

On a Saturday morning in May 2010, I made my way to 25 CPW Gallery in Central Park West Avenue in New York City to participate as a performer in a one-day showcase of reperformances of Marina Abramović’s works. The event had been conceptualized as an alternative to the MoMA retrospective The Artist is Present, which had opened in February earlier that year. The curators highlighted two key factors of The Artist is Absent to justify the alternative exhibition, which centered on Abramović’s “physically and emotionally intense performance pieces.” First, the works selected would include some of Abramović’s more physically dangerous work, unlike the pieces selected for MoMA that consisted of endurance performances of immobility supplemented by media and print documentation alongside sculptures and installations replicating original props and sets (like 1997’s Balkan Baroque or 1974’s Rhythm 0). Second, those selected to perform the works would not have to comply with mainstream body expectations regarding gender, ability, fitness, or heteronormative “beauty,” but would instead incorporate a broader variety of contrasting looks and body types to include queer, transgender, and (dis)abled bodies. These two key differences were formulated in terms of inclusion/exclusion, specifically in the selection of which Abramović works would be showcased and which bodies would be chosen to perform them.

I will argue in this paper that there is a relationship between the two fundamental differences highlighted by the curators of The Artist is Absent: mobility/movement/motion (in the performance works) on the one hand, and the visibility of queer bodies (performing the works) on the other. This paper is therefore a comparative analysis of the two exhibitions of Abramović reperformances in New York City, one a major retrospective presented over the course of several months at a major modern art institution, the other a one-day experimental queer production at an independent art gallery. My aim is not to provide a queer critical analysis of Abramović’s performance works, but rather to examine how The Artist is Absent
mobilized aesthetic and political strategies to enact queer modalities of movement and mobility, embodied relations of temporality and spatiality, corporeal vulnerability, danger, vitality, and precarity.

For the purposes of my argument, I will be using Tim Cresswell’s tentative definition of mobility in *On the Move* as any act of movement between point A and point B, involving a displacement (of something or someone) and a shift in location that “may be towns or cities, or ... may be points a few centimeters apart” (Cresswell 2006, 2). By encompassing movement across space, as well as the minimal movements and motions made by living bodies, this definition is immensely useful for a mobility-based approach to performance analysis, as well as to an understanding of queer corporealities in relation to internal and external forms of motion and mobility. Cresswell elaborates:

> Mobility is linked to a world of practice, of anti-essentialism, anti-foundationalism, and resistance to established forms of ordering and discipline. Often mobility is said to be nonrepresentational or even against representation. Linking all of these, perhaps, is the idea that by focusing on mobility, flux, flow and dynamism we can emphasize the importance of *becoming* at the expense of the already achieved—the stable and static. (Cresswell 2006, 47, italics in the original)

Cresswell thus emphasizes “becoming at the expense of the already achieved,” pointing to an understanding of mobility that undoes, opens, and breaks down, through practice, the closed narratives and finished products of representation, order, and discipline. By resisting universal and essentialist models of knowledge, the “becoming” of mobility replaces the “stable and static” with the fluid temporality and spatiality that moving bodies carry and enact. The concepts of fluidity, becoming and practice are key for the development of my argument in relation to the inclusion of Abramović’s movement pieces, reperformed in a queer context. Importantly, Cresswell draws some degree of distinction between movement and mobility, whereby all mobility implies motion (across space-time) but where movement does not necessarily imply any degree of mobility. It would then follow that we may detect a distinction between the external (visible) and internal (invisible and/or unseen) movements of the body. For example, blood circulation would be one case of internal motion, while the movements of facial muscles may or may not be perceptible to the human eye. Similarly, certain movements/mobilities may be more or less conscious, unconscious, habitual, unusual, or unexpected. On the other hand, *motion* may be applied towards internal or external movements, observable through a variety of means and not necessarily visible without technological mediation. I employ the terms mobility, movement, and motion throughout in different contexts according to the circumstances of the reperformances.

I propose the term “queer corporeal” to refer to the multiple corporealities of trans-, cis-, androgynous, intersex, and genderqueer bodies; “over-” and “under-” weight bodies; (dis)abled, healthy, ill, strong, vulnerable, vital bodies; ordinary and extraordinary bodies; the bodies of sex workers and the bodies of BDSM, leather, and kinky sexualities; bodies that cross heteronormative boundaries and bodies that maintain them; the everyday bodies of lesbian, gay,
bisexual, trans, queer folks. The queer corporeal encompasses what queer bodies in motion can activate and what they enact and invoke in terms of instability, indeterminacy, liminality; the potential for not knowing, for risk, danger, harm; for hybridity, duplicity, ambiguity; for failure, abjection, and “binary terrorism,” a term I borrow from Rebecca Schneider’s *The Explicit Body in Performance* (1997), in which the author uses the notion of binary terrorism in the context of gendered, and specifically female, bodies in performance art. Using the example of artists like Carolee Schneemann, Annie Sprinkle, Karen Finley, and Ana Mendieta, Schneider looks at instances in performance art when the body is used to collapse the distance between sign and signified. According to Schneider, the body made explicit in performance interrupts the act of representation that permits mimetic equivalences to occur between the object and its image. For Schneider, “the collapse of sign and signified onto the literal space of the body employs a binary terrorism that similarly makes evident and interrogates the social ramifications of the gap” (Schneider 1997, 32). As such, a way out of sexual difference is proposed where we can rethink the possibilities of embodiment through/against gender heteronormativity and beyond it. Similarly, when Elizabeth Grosz offers that “the body is what it is capable of doing, and what anybody is capable of doing is well beyond the tolerance of any given culture,” and wonders “Isn’t it even more threatening to show, not that gender can be at variance with sex ... but that there is an instability at the very heart of sex and bodies” (Grosz 1994, 140), she is in fact enunciating her own argument about what bodies are and what we can do with them. The tangible body is unstable and indeterminate, constantly in the making through time and in space, in the same sense that Judith Butler in *Gender Trouble* (1990) identifies the construction of gender as an imitation of an original that can never be historically located because it has never taken place in an actual past but is rather continually (re)produced through social relations in the present.

These familiar concepts from now nearly canonical queer and feminist theories of embodiment would suggest then that there is a liminal border zone between genders/bodies, where through movement and mobility, practice, and *becoming* they are enacted/actualized. Mobility and movement become implicated in a series of considerations about perception, visibility, and sensation, and continuously negotiate the borders between inside/outside, conscious and unconscious, occupying transitional positions among social, political, and biological frames, according to how we prefer to analyze them and for what specific purposes. I will be looking at instances of mobility and immobility in four key performance works originally conceived and performed by Abramović and Ulay in the 1970s, and reperformed in 2010 at two very different spaces, with different audiences and diverse aims. For the purpose of my argument, which looks at how mobility and movement become a source of anxiety and even danger within specific contexts and spaces, (in this case, two urban sites symbolic of contemporary modernity: the space of a major modern art institution in the case of MoMA versus the space of an abandoned commercial space turned into an independent art gallery in the case of 25 CPW), I will be looking at the differences between the two exhibitions. This is by no means to suggest that they have nothing in common—certainly, the two events overlap, geographically and chronologically (the museum and gallery being physically only a few blocks apart, and the one-day exhibition at 25 CPW occurring during the closing weekend of the MoMA retrospective), suggesting contiguity in aesthetics, theme, audience, and even the methodology of reperformance. If anything, *The Artist is Absent* curators sought to replicate many of the key elements of the MoMA retrospective, even details such as the lab coats provided for performers to wear before and after the reperformances. In fact, both the preliminary emails sent to the performers and the print and online materials describing the
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project, including the outline for the planned publication of an exhibition catalogue with
Daylight Books, display genuine engagement with Abramović’s oeuvre, especially regarding her
reperformance methodology. The Artist is Absent curators seemed primarily invested in
showcasing a more diverse and inclusive group of performers and in addressing why certain
pieces, and certain bodies, had been selected, while others had been left out of the
reperformances at MoMA. In the next section, I look into reperformance as method for a queer
analysis of mobility in performance.

Reperforming

It seems important to note that although Marina Abramović’s performances have reached
iconic status in the contemporary art world, they retain an ambivalent position as artworks,
since they cannot be purchased, collected, or auctioned, but are rather preserved, documented,
archived through various media (video, photography, text, artifacts, etc.) in museum collections
across the world. The “scores,” that is, the short written instructions describing the physical
movements and/or situation of the performance, constitute in themselves an important
element of this documentation. While the texts themselves remain copyrighted works, authored
by Abramović and Ulay, they are available for (re)performance without legal permission.

If we reconsider each initial performance of the written “score” as one of many
possible variations, actualized in real time in different contexts/spaces and for a range of
purposes/audiences, then the Abramović-Ulay performances can no longer hold as the “original”
or even as referential, but rather as one of many parts in a process, a continuum of
reenactments distributed over decades among various locations. Similarly, to follow Butler’s
influential and much contested concept of gender performativity as the imitation of an original
that has never taken place, the Abramović-Ulay rendition becomes one of many possible sexed,
gendered variations among a multiplicity of others—not an “original” gender binary in
confrontation, or a virtuoso performance of unique avant-garde genius, but rather a particular
gendered, sexed encounter in a specific context, permeable to a potentially infinite number of
possible permutations across a continuum of bodies, genders, and sexualities.

It may be useful here to briefly consider the meaning of the term “reperformance.” In
the context of Abramović’s MoMA retrospective, it refers to the history of performance art’s
ephemerality, where pieces are often developed by the artist as author/performer and presented
only once before a live audience in galleries, public spaces, or less frequently in conventional
theaters. Thus we use the term “reperformance,” rather than “restaging,” which would refer to a
theater play, or “adaptation,” normally reserved for novels adapted to the stage or cinema or for
a reworking of a film script into a different film. The generally uneasy relationship between
writing and performance is brought to the fore in the plethora of terms to designate how the
same text can be rendered in different formats for different audiences according to multiple
genres, markets, methods, and aesthetics. In the case of performance art, yet another layer is
added to this already complex web, given its historically ambiguous relationship with language
and representation, as well as the general tendency not to perform a specific piece more than
once. This tendency, however, has as much to do with artistic choices as with limited means of
production that make each performance unique because the (usually solo) performer may (and
often will) lack the (physical, financial) means and resources to replicate a particular work.

In Abramović’s case, the term reperformance thus refers both to the history of
performance art and to her position as the co-author of her collaborations with Ulay. By shifting
the focus from her (physical) labour (of mobility and/or of immobility) as performer to her (intellectual) labour (of creating, writing) as author/artist, there is an exponential increase in cultural capital. Whereas performers’ bodies are replaceable and expendable (there is no lack of well-trained, technically proficient professionals capable of performing the pieces in real time), the author’s work is considered original, unique, and irreplaceable in the best Platonic tradition, capable of withstanding the test of time into “immortality” as writing, work of genius, literary document, (in)material object. Thus the term reperformance highlights Abramović’s author function, to borrow the concept from Foucault’s influential 1969 lecture “What Is an Author?, where he highlights how the discursive function of the author as the individual originator and legal proprietor of a text is historically embedded and socially constructed. The implicit temporality of reperforming indicates a potential futurity that repeats, preserves, and perpetuates the original written text of the score, whereas the performer’s body must operate within the material confines of place and space, dependent on physical presence and reliant on the actual embodied present time of the live performance.

These considerations are relevant for a comparative analysis of the reperformances at 25 CPW and at MoMA, as they insert the elements of exhibition practice, spectatorship, and performativity within broader historical contexts. On the other hand, I will not be attempting a comparative analysis between the Abramović-Ulay performances of the 1970s with their renditions in 2010. The contexts are clearly very different, but they may also in fact be more similar than we would be able to articulate. Although much has been said about the commodification of the avant-garde, certainly in relation to Abramović’s unusual status as a performance artist in contemporary art, it is likely that to assign a naïve or disinterested role to the artists, exhibitors, and audiences who participated in pioneering art movements during the 20th century in Europe and North America is to project a romanticized fantasy of an “innocent” avant-garde that has probably never existed.

Reperformance also points to the uneasy relationship in terms of temporality between performance art and its preservation, or between its duration as live format and its future longevity as artwork and cultural artifact. Peggy Phelan observes how, “[d]efined by its ephemeral nature, performance art cannot be documented (when it is, it turns into that document—a photograph, a stage design, a video tape—and ceases to be performance art)” (1993, 78). In this sense, documenting performance art is made nearly impossible except in the live labour of performance and spectatorship, and it is partly with the intention to document/preserve this body of performance works that Abramović has articulated her intention for the reperformances at MoMA as well as her pedagogical aims with her students and other artists (Obrist 2010, 89).

Motion & Stillness

In order to substantiate my argument in more detail, I will turn to Imponderabilia, an endurance stillness piece included in both exhibitions, and to three movement pieces that were reperformed only at 25 CPW. The Artist Is Absent reperformances were structured in rotating shifts undertaken by bodies with a broad rage of genders and sexualities, including trans, cis, and genderqueer bodies; various types of physical impairments and special needs; kinky and BDSM sexualities; sex workers and sex-work activists; and many others, in a heterogeneous ensemble distributed across a gallery space of two floors, over a total of 15 hours of exhibition time, from 10am on Saturday to 1am on Sunday. According to The Artist Is Absent exhibition
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statement on the Daylight Books website, “[t]he group of performers draws heavily from the queer, transgender, and BDSM/leather/kink communities, whose connections to Abramović’s work are frequently alluded to but rarely made explicit.” Over the duration of the exhibition, performers became spectators between, before, or after their shifts, and audiences were free to move through the gallery space at whim, creating a mobile, fluid corpus that surrounded, passed through, observed, or ignored the various live pieces taking place at any time. Significantly, the identities of some of the performers, and the genders and sexualities their bodies enacted, were not necessarily recognizable except by those who might be part of, or have participated in, a particular subculture, activist group, or artistic community. For example, those well-known and active in the leather or sex-work communities might have been easily recognizable to others also within these communities and their adjacent subcultures. Similarly, those suffering from chronic conditions and/or (dis)abilities might have been only visible in the enactment of their embodied difference by those part of health, crip, or disability activism movements. The curators’ urge and capacity to accommodate special needs, the accessibility of the (upper floor) of the venue, and the experimental, DIY approach allowed for the inclusion of embodied differences across such a broad spectrum. However, the tension between corporeal visibility and invisibility animated the exhibition throughout its duration, functioning both as its flaw and as its strength: when free from the duty of “representing” or “standing for” a group, community, subculture, or category, the legibility of one’s difference might also have been erased or compromised.

In order to analyze these works in terms of the types of mobility and of the queer corporealities they enact, I will use my own first-hand observations as both performer and spectator. Since the retrospective has been sparsely documented, aside from the project website (no longer available online) and the Daylight Books webpage, only scattered announcements in blogs and art listings seem to remain. My highly personal, eye-witness account, based on the notes and impressions I collected throughout the day, forms a relevant arc of affective, physical, and social experiences. As performer and spectator, I found the intensity of the project in terms of its raw energy, force, and vitality to be at times alternately breathtaking, humbling, unbearable, and numbing. I cannot verify the reliability of this archive or attest to its objectivity in any sense. I can only attempt to demonstrate its relevance for documenting and preserving a collective project of queer performance and for articulating, from my immersive position as observer, some of the body dynamics, politics, and aesthetics at stake.

One characteristic the four pieces I discuss below have in common is repetition—there is a cumulative effect at work, whereby the motion involved produces experiences of embodiment for both audience and performer(s), as well as visible, audible, and tactile effects that continuously increase in intensity over time. This cumulative effect is foundational for endurance performance, as is(are) the breaking point(s) where a limit is reached (pain, suffocation, exhaustion) and the performance is either paused momentarily or brought to a halt altogether. In this sense, again, Abramović’s works bear a close resemblance to BDSM play, where a range of activities may be engaged in until a physical or psychological limit is reached, and perhaps a safe word uttered, or a physiological emergency occurs, or any number of developments may bring the play scene more or less abruptly to an end. We could contrast this repetition—which includes moments of rupture, pause, and restart—with the continuous immobility of the works at MoMA, even in the case of Imponderabilia, the only work presented at both exhibitions and one of the best known Abramović/Ulay collaborations. First performed in 1977 at the doorway of the Galleria Comunale d’Arte Moderna in Bologna, this work positions the two performers face-to-face obstructing the entrance to the exhibition space, forcing each
patron to pass between them sideways, choosing which performer to face. The mobility of the spectator and the collective mobilities of the audience become the focus of this piece, where the performers remain immobile for hours until breaking point. By randomly shifting the male/female combinations of cisgender performers, the retrospective at MoMA modified the heteronormative binary gender dynamic of the 1977 performance and generated a vast range of interactions and possibilities. At 25 CPW, the broader range of genders present (cisgender alongside trans, queer, androgynous, intersex, and multigendered bodies), and the wider diversity of sexualities and body types, amplified considerably the possible permutations of gendered relations among sexed bodies.

Since at 25 CPW *Imponderabilia* was presented at the entrance, as in the first Abramović-Ulay performance, it became the introductory scene, whereas at MoMA the work was showcased inside the museum space along with other works. At 25 CPW, the performers’ bodies, facing each other, obstructed the passage by the entrance and forced visitors to go through sideways, facing one performer only, while pressing against the naked bodies of the other performers in order to pass through into the exhibition space. The work thus demanded physical contact, and in some cases eye contact, and a proximity whose degree of intimacy had to be negotiated in the moment. In some cases, the difficulty in determining the genders of the performers engendered puzzlement, confusion, amusement, and discomfort among random passers-by in the audience, whose comments and reactions revealed a lack of familiarity with non-cisgender bodies. The nudity of the performers made their (un)doing of gender even more explicit, and the inability to make genitals, bodies, and facial features correspond neatly according a cisgender model enhanced the effect of estrangement that *Imponderabilia* already provokes. On the other hand, among several visitors there seemed to be moments closer to recognition, elation, and perhaps even relief at encountering a scene of queer corporeality in the white cube of the contemporary art gallery. There were moments of laughter, playfulness, and flirtation, as spectator bodies participated, even if briefly, in the piece by transposing the space held by the performers. Throughout the duration of reperformance, as its energy rose and fell and as the tempo shifted according to the number of visitors entering the space, these bodily encounters displayed the staggering diversity of New York’s population, from tourists and passers-by, to friends of the performers and curators, from LGBT press and activists, Abramović followers and contemporary art aficionados.

The first performance of *Relation in Space* began later, in a separate, less-exposed and dimly lit section of the gallery. Reminiscent of the studies of human motion by Edward Muybridge, the piece was first performed at the Venice Biennial in 1976. To watch it reperformed by Ariel “Speedwagon”—one of the exhibition co-curators and a well-known gender-bending queer performance artist, familiar to many within the downtown performance scene in New York—radically disrupts the physical dynamic of the work as initially performed by Abramović and Ulay. Ariel, whose movements display the elegance, grandeur, and expressivity of a trained performer, is white with a tall, full figure. She crosses the gallery space several times until her body collides against her performance partner, a black man of medium build and height. With each crossing, their bodies gather weight and speed and the thump of their collisions increases in sound, tempo, intensity, and frequency. Both race and gender come to the fore in these negotiations between rest, motion, vulnerability, and force, between the slightest strokes of skin, flesh brushing against flesh, to brutal frontal contact, the full weight of bones, muscles, and internal organs colliding against another body in motion in a loud thump. Then come brief cyclic pauses, demanded by the sensations of pain, heat, and exhaustion, only to be brought to a halt by another cycle of rising clashes and bruised skin. The tension between
them is almost unbearable. No one in the audience can take their eyes away from their spectacular, cyclical clashes for well over an hour. The impact of the two bodies reverberates over and over across the room as a thumping sound that increases in intensity with each collision, as the thin walls of the gallery reveal their own material frailty, and the floor shakes under our feet at the stronger collisions, reminding everyone in the room that the spectacle of motion is also a matter of gravity. The collisions of the two bodies rise to a crescendo of force and violence, only to end in an anti-climax of vulnerability, tears, and a candid hug between the two performers.

Since the Abramović/Ulay collaborative works were purposefully designed by the artists with the objective of exploring ways of relating intimately through the body, these pieces often bring to the fore matters of sexual difference. In particular, the more physical pieces draw their power in part from presumed biological differentiation between two opposite sexes. In Body Art, Amelia Jones comments on how “[Abramović and Ulay’s] relationship to each other and the audience aligns their body art works with a universalizing conception of sexuality and gender that ultimately veils the privileging of masculinity on what is in effect experienced as a bipolar model of gender” (Jones 1998, 141). At 25 CPW, with less polarized heteronormative gender relations and with variables other than a cisgender, binary sex model, the two performers’ bodies seemed over time to transform from gendered, sexed, human, animal, to plain organic matter, weight, mass, crossing a room and colliding, each repeated trajectory bringing to the fore the nonhuman and even the nonliving aspects of embodied life.

In Breathing In/Breathing Out, two performers breathe out into each others’ mouths and breathe in again through their mouths, the toxic air exhaled until they approach suffocation. The circulation of carbon dioxide reaches toxic levels and the precariousness of life comes to the fore, as do the limits of lungs, blood vessels, and the vital organs whose labour supports the continuance of physical life. Unlike Relation in Space, the biological process of breathing neutralizes gender considerably, as both Abramović and Ulay struggled with suffocation and oxygen deprivation in ways that are not explicitly sex- or gender-specific. On the contrary, the spectacle afforded was of the living body, the spectacle of the respiratory system, of heart rates and body temperature and blood pressure, of metabolic and endocrine functions hard at work, blood pumping. At 25 CPW, as various teams of cis-, trans- and genderqueer performers took their places to reperform the score in multiple combinations of gender/sex, the conflict between the labour of performance and the limitations of the body, diligently enacted in this scene of breath, exposed all that cannot be maintained within binary models of male/female or mind/body dichotomies. The extremes to which a trans, queer visual artist and their partner take this performance brings them both to tears and causes them to choke on several occasions. The labour of exhaling into each other’s mouths is interrupted several times, until they have breathed in enough fresh air to resume. The scene provokes a sense of collective air shortage; the gallery space is not especially ventilated and the temperature rises as more visitors and performers arrive. The space begins to feel crowded and sticky. The agency of these two bodies, bodies that manage to stay alive in spite of this self-imposed ordeal, brings to the fore how we are collectively limited by and constituted through and alongside the bio-logic of the body. Again, as the work progresses, the duration of the endurance stunt forces the performing bodies to come undone as gendered, sexed, recognizably human, living entities, and to acquire an opaque quality as brute matter, struggling to stay alive, much more internal organs (lungs, throat) and physiological functions (metabolic activity, respiration, circulation) than the more external gendered features of face, hair, genitals, or secondary sexual characteristics. Even the skin and flesh of these bodies seem to fall away to expose an interior organic body pulsing to
remain alive through the increasing levels of toxicity of carbon dioxide.

*Rhythm 10* (1973) remains possibly Abramović’s most difficult performance to watch, even in its videotaped version. There is something so plain and familiar about cutting one’s fingers against the blade of a knife that to see it repeated over and over becomes nearly unbearable. The score of the performance, Abramović’s first, is longer and more elaborate than most and includes the following instructions:

I turn on the tape recorder. I take the first knife and stab in between the fingers of my left hand as fast as possible. Every time I cut myself, I change the knife. When I’ve used all of the knives (all of the rhythms), I rewind the tape recorder. I listen to the tape recording of the first part of the performance. I concentrate... *(The Artist is Absent* website, 2015)

The motion this time is closely bound to hand-eye coordination, to the sounds made through motion and replicated via motion. At 25 CPW, even before the performer assigned for *Rhythm 10* could begin, I was already outside the gallery accompanied by a friend who had come to see the show, enacting our own self-protection, our own censoring and selecting of which Abramović scenes we were indeed willing not simply to *watch* (I had viewed various videos of this performance several times, as possibly her most iconic work), but rather to *be with*, to be in the presence/present of, witnessing and experiencing in the same space at the same time. Although my friend justified her refusal to watch in terms of concern for the health, safety, and especially psychological wellbeing of the performer, I was well aware that it was my body, my vulnerability, and my flesh and fingers and bones I was concerned with, not those of the person who had shown up fully equipped with first-aid supplies and who is an experienced BDSM player. Returning now to my recollection of the moment, I realize it was never the cuts or the blood that terrified me, but rather the live sound of repeated stabbing echoing through the gallery walls, followed by hissed gasps each and every time a blade cut through flesh. The production of live sound, closely bound to motion, is what this work emphasizes, and it is precisely the live audible element of the work that becomes unbearable, as it makes its way into a tape recorder and is then replicated—conflating temporalities in the binary of live/recorded and converging kinetic and aural impressions. Flesh wounds and dripping blood, on the other hand, are bound to associations of abjection and contagion, and when performed in such closely controlled circumstances, destabilize medicalized accounts of an “ill/abnormal” body and mind against a “healthy/normal” one—another form of “binary terrorism” that possibly provoked stronger responses for other spectators.

The High Cost of Motion

Throughout Western modern art history, the gallery space has tended to be conceived as one of fixity, immobility, and stability, where nonliving objects and materials are displayed to a spectator whose movement and behavior are closely surveilled and regulated. Exhibition, preservation, and documentation are the traditional functions of the museum as institution, closely linked to practices of cultural/social selection and dissemination. In fact, the static tendencies of visual art contained within the museum space are precisely what Abramović and other visual artists, especially in the 1950s, 60s, and 70s, aimed to disturb through movements such as action painting, kinetic art, live sculpture, and what would later come to be known as
“performance art,” or in British English “live art,” a term perhaps more indicative of the historical development of the genre as it refers to the “live” aspects inherent in all visual art practices. Cresswell argues throughout On the Move that the very transience of moving, its precariousness and ephemerality, places moving subjects necessarily closer to relations of indeterminacy and instability. In a similar manner, the enlivenment of motion opens up the potential for vulnerability and failure necessary to foment and arrive at the queer corporeal in its utopian and dystopian dimensions.

In a 2010 interview with the curator Hans Ulrich Obrist, Abramović speaks of the close restrictions, both legally and institutionally, of the museum/gallery space and how these restrictions make it nearly impossible to do any type of live work, from performance art to dance or even live sound (Obrist 2010, 57). Thus, the regulations distinctively affect certain types of art-making more than others, specifically those forms that are ephemeral, time-based, and leave no record other than possibly an archive of documentation. Significantly, these are also the types of art that are the least profitable, precisely because no art object is produced that can be later commodified and circulated within the circuits of contemporary art in a neoliberal global market. I find it relevant to note here that although Abramović is indeed an exception within the field of performance art in terms of the financial value and marketability of her works, part of the reason for this exception is precisely her constant emphasis on the plasticity of her performances, the preservation of archival documentation, and the material value of artifacts like props and scores. Although performance is an ephemeral medium, Abramović has been able to counteract this ephemerality with the solid remains of a broad range of highly profitable end-products, including books, films, and memorabilia.

What, then, is the danger of live performance? What threat does it pose, what violence can it commit, that makes the museum/gallery space so insistent on containing, preventing, and minimizing it, through legal restrictions and regulations? And finally, what are the dangers inherently posed by a group of untrained, unfit bodies enacting movement/mobility in a neoliberal, commodified art space? I argue that it is the imminent danger of failure, and a queer failure at that, that holds bodies in place and favors stillness and silence instead. Movement and mobility bring to the fore the vulnerability of biological embodiment in its staggering multiplicity—the body that falls, hurts, fails, bleeds, bruises, and breaks; the body that makes sounds; a loud unpredictable body—thumping, breathing, running, hissing. It is a body that secretes viscous fluids, a contagious body, wholly unreliable. The controlled silence of the gallery site at MoMA, the white cube filled with still, silent bodies, projected images, texts, and props, would have been brutally disrupted with the scenes I describe in the section above. Both prolonged stillness and silence are immensely demanding on the body’s resources and an endurance performance of immobility is indeed a dangerous feat. Without technique, practice, and a well-functioning body, the repercussions can be fatal, or otherwise damaging, with possible heart failure, brain damage, and even internal bleeding. Therefore, it is evident that MoMA’s anxieties in terms of danger or risk were related to the performers’ bodies. These bodies, in fact, had been recruited among well-trained dance and performance professionals, whose physical schema includes a range of techniques and resources at their disposal. Importantly, these performers could easily be replaced by other, equally well-trained bodies, hired for the labor of performing stillness in the museum space at their own risk, their own peril, their own cost, and financially compensated for their skill, training, experience, energy, and time. As such, the model of their engagement in these reperformances is perfectly aligned with the model of late neoliberal capitalism, in which biological bodies are always replaceable as highly profitable entities, producing, making, delivering.
I therefore contend that the concern over the “dangerous mobilities” enacted in the Abramović pieces not selected for reperformance at MoMA was not based on any genuine concern for the performers’ bodies, their safety, or well-being—on the contrary, since immobility is extremely taxing and dangerous for performers. The risk, then, lies somewhere else. For the remainder of this paper, I argue that the potential danger resides in how these mobilities might have put both museum visitors and the museum space at risk through exposure to the live, tangible, living bodies engaged in motion, in mobile activity across space and time. These mobilities may have included running, colliding, breathing, suffocating, stabbing, and cutting. It was to protect the spectator (visitor/consumer/patron) present, in real time, at the museum site, from the contagion, damage, and harm of such performances that they were not selected. By ensuring that the performing bodies were immobile, not only was the space of the museum left untouched and pristine, clean and tidy, but time remained still, paused, halted. Preventing movement thus cancelled the actual duration of the live performance, and the spectral bodies at MoMA appeared as if frozen or embalmed. By becoming a-temporal, through the suppression of movement, the MoMA reperformances became little more than museum objects, a permanent collection of white, slim, fit, cisgender bodies, marble-like sculptures fixed in space and time for the audience to marvel and puzzle at, isolated specimens in a spectacle of immobility, suspended in time.

Utopian Motions, or a Queer Sort of Failure

I will conclude this paper with a section on failure as theory and practice operating across a broader queer ethics and aesthetics. In 2011’s *The Queer Art of Failure*, Jack Halberstam argues that “[u]nder certain circumstances, failing, losing, forgetting, unmaking, undoing, unbecoming, not knowing may in fact offer more creative, more cooperative, more surprising ways of being in the world” (Halberstam 2011, 15). In a brilliantly successful demonstration, Halberstam enunciates the many links between queer failure and illness, stupidity, ignorance, loss, loneliness, awkwardness, alienation, and pain, rather than the neoliberal capitalist ideals of health, progress, success, and accumulation. The impending outcomes of multiple failures, of not reaching the desired effect, the correct result, the best possible outcome, are precisely along the lines of what we aimed to do at 25 CPW. In making an open call to the queer, sex-positive, and BDSM/leather/kinky communities in NYC and beyond to come and participate in an alternative to the Abramović retrospective at MoMA, the curators of The Artist is Absent were consciously courting, or at least flirting with, disaster. Many of the performers (myself included) never auditioned for the piece we signed up to perform, nor did we rehearse or prepare in any particular way, or participate in any of the preliminary information meetings organized by the curators. At least some of us were not familiar with Abramović’s work, nor were we particularly interested in the cultural or artistic value of her oeuvre. Some of the performers I spoke with were there, first and foremost, because this was an event by queers for queers, where so many ways of doing embodiment, gender, sexuality, would come into contact, play, and interact while collaborating on a collective project. Others came for the opportunity to participate in an unusual event, and others, like myself, were personally interested in reperforming a particular Abramović piece (I did *Cleaning the Mirror*, scrubbing a plastic skeleton replica for an hour). The very “absence” of the artist indicated in the title referred already precisely to the achievement of failure: not here, no show, vanished, gone, missing—no icon of avant-garde performance on display. Absence might then be read here as already a sign
of failure in and of itself, and in this case highlighted the possibility of embodied physical presence—a utopian performative of queer, anti-normative relations among living bodies.

For Jill Dolan, the utopian in performance is made possible precisely through the coming together in one place of a group of people to explore and experience new possibilities: “The politics lie in our willingness to attend or to create performance at all, to come together in real places […] to explore in imaginary spaces the potential of the ‘not yet’ and the ‘not here’” (Dolan 2005, 20). Similarly, José Muñoz locates in indeterminacy and potentiality the workings of a utopian temporality for the production of queerness: “The utopian function is enacted by a certain surplus in the work that promises a futurity, something that is not quite here” (Muñoz 2009, 45). In assigning a queer utopian function to certain artistic and literary works, I am not claiming, and neither are Dolan or Muñoz, that in order to be queer a work must demonstrate a capacity for utopia, but rather that the futurity of certain queer works points towards the potential of utopia. Or, as Muñoz phrases it, “Queerness is utopian, and there is something queer about the utopian” (Muñoz 2009, 56).

In *The Artist is Absent*, we attempted, succeeding and failing, to enact the utopia of a queer corporeal in motion, activating living, biological bodies to disrupt pre-established notions of safety, health, sanity, and normalcy. We failed often, and in different ways, at 25 CPW. The lack of publicity or visibility and the ensuing erasure of the exhibition from public access, cultural memory, the archives of queer/trans/leather/BDSM histories, and performance- or contemporary-art repositories, is itself an enactment of queer failure, as are the unsuccessful attempts at publishing the exhibition catalogue, the disappearance of the project website, the slow but steady gradual obliteration of all vestiges of this one-day event. We succeeded at this failure, at this unmarking, this erasure. Yet there is an enduring quality to the labour of that day, subsisting, refusing to be shut down. There is still a webpage available online describing the project, some faint references across obscure articles in publications, and even a brief mention in a note in an *Artforum* article, in which David Deitcher regards the exhibition as one of his favorite examples of alternative art shows “commenting critically on big-budget mainstream exhibitions” (Deitcher 2010). Our multiple successes and failures, our ensuing mobilities and immobilities, our more-or-less awkward movements across the gallery space, the harm inflicted and witnessed, and our many pleasures came to constitute the queer corporeal we enacted that day, reperformed with and against the avant-garde aesthetics of Marina Abramović.

Notes

1. From the Daylight Books webpage outlining *The Artist is Absent* project, accessed October 2015.

2. The planned publication of an exhibition catalogue, including essays and prose by the performers, has not happened at the time of writing.

3. With acknowledgements to Jasnira Zuniga for pointing out the potential applicability of the term for an analysis of queer mobility in performance.

5. For ethical reasons, I will refrain from including any identifying details regarding specific gender (dis)identifications, sexual orientations, sexual practices, except in the case of Ariel "Speedwagon," a well-known queer performer and The Artist is Absent curator.

6. At The Artist Is Absent, there was discursive space for (dis)abling conditions to come forth alongside a vast range of possible morphologies engaged in the physical labour of reperformance. Specific arrangements were made to accommodate for special needs and CPW was wheelchair accessible.

Works Cited


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