Marina Abramović and the Re-performance of Authenticity

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Introduction

This essay argues that the critique of authenticity that has dominated academic discourse since the early 1980s is currently being dismantled under the rubric of a general 1960s revival—including a revival of authenticity, a moral category having to do with representational purity. Evidence of authenticity's return—and transformation—can be seen in the phenomenon of "re-performance," whereby scantly documented performances are recreated for the purpose of re-experiencing, documenting, and preserving them. These recreated performances from the late 1960s to mid-1970s are not mere repetitions of the original works, most of which were not meant to be repeated either live or in photos or on videotape. Most of the re-performances of this ephemeral art have been presented for the purposes of historical preservation, including Marina Abramović's *Seven Easy Pieces*, which is discussed in this essay. Curiously, the preservation of work whose authenticity once expressly relied on its not being preserved has not met any resistance, even from those who had previously insisted on ephemerality as performance's defining feature. I read this development as evidence that attitudes towards representation are shifting, at least in the avant-garde. It seems that authenticity, itself, is changing.

As Philip Auslander has shown,[1] the meaning of authenticity is not stable, but has shifted in relation to technological and generational change. In what follows, I attribute the welcome reception being accorded re-performance to the current generational configuration. With the looming retirement of baby boomers and the rise of the new "millennial" generation, the 1960s—a period I understand as beginning around 1963 and ending with the U.S. pullout from Vietnam in 1974—is being recalled with new interest. In the art and performance worlds, this is occurring through two linked processes. First, there is a nostalgic process of historicization and sacralization that seeks out and honors neglected 1960s figures and works. Second, there is a regenerative process that brings back ideas, frameworks, styles, and techniques as models for future artistic endeavors. Subject to both processes, many works that were dismissed as naïvely essentialist in the 1980s and 1990s are being rediscovered—their rescue from oblivion rendered even more dramatic by the idea of their originally intended ephemerality. Having been created to exist authentically only in the present—and thus having been created, as Peggy Phelan

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has noted, in order to disappear[2]—these performances are being resurrected into art history and re-performed as a generational legacy.

The 1960s Today

There is a sense in which the 1960s have never really died, and the current revival does bear a general resemblance to other 1960s-referencing moments that have cycled through popular culture over the past forty years. One might recall, for instance, Coca-Cola's 1994 launching of Fruitopia, a "revolutionary" beverage with flavors like "Strawberry Passion Awareness." The appearance of that kind of marketing, along with the reappearance of chokers and other fashions, were a part of the brief retro phenomenon of the mid-1990s. Yet the current revival is distinct from such commercially-driven revivals, which lacked today's wistfulness towards the period. Along with a general shift in mood towards positive thinking (including the advent of Happiness Studies in academia), there have been several fortieth-anniversary celebrations (a day-long Summer of Love celebration in San Francisco, to name a recent example), the release of new Beatles covers by younger bands, the publication of several new books about the Beatles, at least one film about them (Julie Taymor's *Across the Universe*), as well as the publication of autobiographies of Eric Clapton and Bob Dylan, who has also been the subject of a recent Todd Haynes film, *I'm Not Here*. Bell-bottom pants have also made a comeback, but the biggest surprise is the return of 1960s art, and in particular, 1960s performance art, whose brand of authenticity tends towards austerity and away from audience entertainment of any kind.

Most of the revived performance works have lain dormant, untouched even by their creators for thirty to forty years. This neglect was due, in part, to the change in intellectual climate at the end of the 1970s, a change that cast these works in a rather shameful light. In the 1980s and into the 1990s, they reeked of "essentialism," a quality that has finally lost its vituperative energy and come to seem almost *vague*. As an accusation, essentialism has certainly lost most of its sting. As an accusation that, in particular, feminists of the "theory generation" had become accustomed to flinging at their direct elders, essentialism no longer seems to have the moral currency to uphold differences between those with an outmoded, traditional understanding of (gender) identity as given and authentic, and those with a more sophisticated, theoretical understanding of identity as contingent and constructed. Starting in the late 1990s, the austerity of the critical discourse that branded early performance art as essentialist—along with the generational tensions that this branding upheld—began to fade such that today this work finally begins to acquire the feeling of history. "This period [the 1960s] is now history," Roselee Goldberg announced in conjunction with the 2005 founding of *Performa*, the performance-centered organization dedicated to the resurrection of older work and the inspiration of new. It is therefore, she writes, "ripe for excavation, which

. . . explains the increasing visibility of performance, especially in the museum context."[3]

Art institutions have indeed contributed to the greater trend. Examples are the Whitney Museum of Art, which held a celebratory *Summer of Love* exhibit in 2007, and the current show at the Los Angeles County Museum of Art, *SoCal: Southern California Art of the 1960s and 70s from LACMA'S Collection.* There have been multiple retrospectives focusing exclusively on the avant-garde, many of which have featured women artists whose works were under-recognized in the 1960s and after: Carolee Schneemann at The New Museum in New York (1997), Martha Rosler at the Ikon Gallery in London (1998), and Eleanor Antin at The Los Angeles Art Museum (1999). The Ronald Feldman Fine Arts Gallery in New York also recently put Hannah Wilke's *Intra-Venus* tapes on display.

Perhaps the most curious development, however, is the re-performance phenomenon, which revives the aesthetics of authenticity reviled by theory. Re-performances are performances from the past that, in recent years, have been brought to life again with the intention of rendering homage to their original context. Rather than comparing them to a theatrical revival, which implies mere repetition, Phelan has compared re-performance to the musical practice of "covering" the works of others. The following examples reveal that this recent trend in re-performance has been dedicated to covering the works of 1960s artists almost exclusively: The Museum of Contemporary Art sponsored a recreation of John Cage's *MusiCircus* in 2005 and 2007. The Wooster Group has been working on two pieces that use re-performance—*Poor Theater*, an ambivalent homage to Jerzy Grotowski and the Polish Laboratory Theatre's production *Akropolis* (as it was recorded in a 1962 film), and another piece, *Hamlet*, which repeated and reworked Richard Burton's 1964 film of the Broadway production. A recreation of the ur-performance of the 1960s, Allan Kaprow's *18 Happenings in 6 Parts* (1959), was featured at the second performance biennial sponsored by *Performa*, an organization whose founding itself marks a revival of the performance art form based on models established in the 1960s rather than the 1980s, when performance had a rather different form.

As a way of looking into the meaning of these revivals, I offer the example of Abramović's re-performance project *Seven Easy Pieces*, which was presented at the Guggenheim Museum in New York in 2005. Curated by Nancy Spector, Abramović's recreations of seminal works from the 1960s was an exhaustive excavation of performance authenticity as it was manifested in endurance art. At the same time, this newly resurrected authenticity was theatrical in a way that would have been scorned during the 1960s itself. "In the beginning," Abramović once remarked, "you had to hate theater . . . to reject all the artificiality of the theater, the rehearsal situation, in which everything is predictable, the time structure and the predetermined ending."[4] By contrast, *Seven Easy Pieces* used theatrical measures to enhance the experience of the original works: video projections on multiple

large screens, the presence of documentary cameras, and props. Gauging from the response, the perception of the pieces' authenticity was not undermined. Instead, authenticity seemed to have been transformed into something that took place *within* representation rather than, impossibly, outside it.

The Abramović Re-performances

Seven Easy Pieces was a highly visible recreation of several key performance pieces from the 1960s and 1970s, including one of Abramović's. The Belgrade-born Abramović's so-called "easy pieces" took place in the atrium of New York City's Guggenheim Museum on seven consecutive nights. Each night the performance lasted for seven consecutive hours, ending with a new piece created by Abramović for the occasion in which she appeared in an enormous sheeny blue dress that encompassed the stage like a tent. The dress, which garnered the least commentary in the published responses,[5] lifted her high above the ground floor audience and into the spiral of the Guggenheim. The pieces that got the most attention from the press were more raw, less clothed, and, in them, Abramović took her usual meditative—even zoned out—approach to self-torture and sexual display. Whereas in the big blue dress she had fairy-tale proportions, the older pieces recreated the matter-of-factness—the *earnestness*—of 1960s art. The blue dress was a fiction, an exaggeration: the older pieces mostly returned to the aesthetic of literalism—of authenticity—that demanded real time duration, unfalsified emotional response, and task-like dedication to the work at hand.

Endurance is the *sine qua non* of performance authenticity because the performer proceeds calmly, in a state of quasi-meditation, in an atmosphere of crisis. In pain or just stillness, Abramović is as straightforward as possible. Ordinarily, she speaks very little. Her calm acceptance is explicitly not entertaining. Neither is her nudity meant to be entertaining. In many works, she presents herself without the "pretence" of clothes, as only herself. The nude body also becomes a passive vehicle, made available to harm, derision, and stimulation, a pose described by some critics as a gift or, in curator Nancy Spector's term, "an essay in submission."[6] The most famous example of this is *Rhythm O* (1974), in which Abramović presented herself seated impassively behind a table of implements, many of them weapons, which spectators were invited to use against her. The performance was stopped when the audience became too violent: a man held a pistol up to her head.

Patrice Pavis, who describes Abramović as a "Calamity Jane" "who causes constant problems in addition to being the victim of these self-inflicted problems,"[7] points out the traditional dramatic structure in Abramović's performances: she puts herself at risk and then rescues herself. This definition, however, makes Abramović sound like a circus performer and doesn't take into account the length of her performances or their intended status as spiritual ordeals. The audience and the performer share hours of silence and stillness—a sharing that continues, in

Abramović's thinking, even if the audience members leave. The long rounds of applause Abramović received at the midnight end of several of the more difficult evenings of *Seven Easy Pieces* indicated admiration, but also relief. If there is rescue involved in this work, it is also a rescuing of the audience.

   "Back to the Days of Crotchless Pants and a Deceased Rabbit" was the irreverent title of the *New York Times* review of the Abramović re-performances written by Roberta Smith.[8] The title referred to two pieces: Austrian Valie Export's *Action Pants: Genital Panic* (1969) and Joseph Beuys's *How to Explain Pictures to a Dead Hare* (1965). In addition, Abramović performed a piece of her own, *Lips of Thomas* (1975), as well as pieces by Vito Acconci (*Seedbed*, 1972), Gina Pane (*The Conditioning*, 1973), and Bruce Naumann (*Body Pressure*, 1974). Each piece was chosen because of its influence, on both Abramović's artistic development as well as the entirety of performance history, making the evenings something of a labor of canonization as well as a personal quest on Abramović's part. In becoming a part of history, performance art—the art that had forever shunned the inauthenticity of collection, documentation, and the market—was becoming respectable.

   This new respectability "rescues" the form from popular culture, which has borrowed plentifully from avant-garde performance, including Abramović's work. One episode of the sixth season of *Sex in the City* featured a fictionalized version of Abramović's 2002 performance, *The House With The Ocean View*. Also, as depicted in the book *Performa, Vogue Italia* did a fashion shoot that exactly copied Jaap de Graaf's documentary photographs of *Relation in Space* (1976), which Abramović performed with her former partner, Ulay. The Guggenheim's presentation of *Seven Easy Pieces* indicated that this type of performance has been re-routed back to the high-art mainstream, and that it has emerged relatively unscathed from its mass-culture existence. It now can boast of having a roster of stars whose appearance—albeit "virtually," through Abramović—has put the art form back on the map as a commodity. Its anti-market history only enhances its value on the academic and art markets.

   Most reviews were more reverent than the *Times* and, notably, did not mention the years when this sort of performance was not made, seen, or written about. The re-performances rendered the recent past continuous, as if anti-essentialism had never fractured the academic public's interest in the art form. The art world welcomed Abramović, who has referred to herself as the "grandmother of performance art," and the medium by which she made her name and in whose name she has continued to create for over forty years. In particular, they welcomed the idea of re-performance, which provides an overview of the field for those unfamiliar with it, and is a validating salute to some of the key figures in a disappearing past. From all accounts, seeing Abramović re-perform these seminal works was a vivid blast from a past that, more often than not, had equated remembrance—at least technologically-aided remembrance—with inauthenticity. Their paradoxical

existence, as both document and event, allowed the re-performances to circumvent inauthenticity, delivering a blast that resonates with the current 1960s revival even for audience members-once-removed, like me.

The Guardians of Community

If *being oneself* was one aspect of the 1960s ethos reflected in the starkness of performance art, the other was *community*, the idea that crowds might be capable of organically producing an authentic experience of self among others. More than twenty years after the negative crowds of fascism, the radicals of the 1960s retained the notion of a like-mindedness that would not promote conformity or violence but celebration, cooperation, even love—although any form of intensity, including angry confrontation, seemed a sign that something real was happening. Curiously non-exclusive of the inflammatory crowds of fascism described by Elias Canetti, the authentic crowd of the 1960s was one that eschewed no affiliative act, negative or positive. It was the intensity that counted.

By all accounts, being in the audience of *Seven Easy Pieces* brought back this 1960s feeling about the utopian potentialities of group life. Responses focus particularly on Abramović's recreation of Vito Acconci's *Seedbed*, a piece in which he had masturbated underneath a gallery floor, "seeding" the gallery space as he listened and responded to the sounds of visitors above. For many, the party atmosphere generated among the audience of the re-performed Acconci piece seemed to pick right up where Richard Schechner left off when he wrote in 1973 that "[p]articipation takes place precisely at the point where the performance breaks down and becomes a social event."[9] The critic Theresa Smalec illustrates this perspective when she writes of the circular space where the audience sat above Abramović (for fifteen minutes at a time) that it seemed "a space of true reciprocity"[10] because the interactions among audience members took on a sudden intimacy. She also describes how, at a certain point, the "break-down" of the performance (as Schechner has it) was so intense that it required the intervention of a museum guard, a situation that compelled an even greater degree of bonding among the crowd.

As transcripts from the recorded conversations of *Seedbed* audience members reveal,[11] the sense of inhabiting a communal space was produced by the absurdity—as well as, no doubt, the familiarity—of the idea of sex as an endurance art, as well as by the relief experienced among those who had been in the audience on previous evenings, when the content of the work was self-torture. Ironically, the communal feeling was also produced by the invisibility of the performer, who was heard but not seen. Without her sober, focused gaze, the audience seems to have grown giddy at the mere idea of interacting with each other under such unusual circumstances. Critic Johanna Burton comments in this regard that the "most striking of all" in the *Seven Easy Pieces* "was the audience's newfound interest in itself." In the transcribed

conversations, recorded during the actual performances, audience members often commented on what it was like to be there, chatting as Abramović moaned below them. As Burton and others also point out, this focus on the experience of being in the audience was encouraged by the Guggenheim's theatrical architecture: "As much as people looked toward the platform concealing the artist, they also looked past it to survey each other surveying . . . an activity encouraged by the presence of a high-power telescope placed on the second floor."[12]

Abramović's invisibility may have encouraged audience members to bond with each other, but her sexual talk also encouraged the audience to connect with her through fantasy. In keeping with the Acconci model, Abramović whispered descriptions of what she was thinking and doing into a microphone from a room below. According to Smalec, the model superceded the original's participatory ethos because Abramović's sexual talk was less objectifying. While Acconci described spectators' contributions as passively contributing to his fantasy and pleasure, "Abramović," writes Smalec, insists that "our footsteps are not enough; we must actively immerse ourselves in shaping our contact with her." Smalec quotes Abramović's rather maternal invocation to "[c]lose your eyes and keep them closed. Forget you're at the museum. Don't be afraid. Don't be ashamed. Give to me all that you desire."[13]

According to several accounts, at least one of *Seedbed's* audience responded to Abramović's invitation to give of himself with a literalness that, to the other audience members seated on the floor beside him, bespoke the authenticity of his intentions. Smalec writes that he

> starts vigorously rubbing his groin against the edges of the inner circle. As Marina climaxes yet again, he drops to the ground on all fours and luridly yells, "Does that excite you?" Security immediately rushes in, commanding him to leave. What's uplifting is how onlookers protest this encroachment: "You don't understand the performance!" . . . Eventually, the guards relent: the unruly man is permitted to stay. We've won our little victory against the sanitized machine.[14]

From the 1960s perspective Smalec espouses at this point in the essay, the museum guards represent the machine—a repressive presence against which the audience could bond. Yet from another perspective, the guards represent order and even a higher aesthetic intelligence in the face of the crowd's chaotic self-appreciation. Roberta Smith, who refers to some guards by name and in general treats them as the heroes of *Seven Easy Pieces*, writes that "A young guard . . . expressed disappointment, saying that it seemed like a carnival ride as people stood in line to reach the stage, waited on the stage for sounds of a climax and

then disembarked." For Smith, the guard's view is the authentic one. Not only are they described as being in sympathy with the true aims of the performance, but their performance of professional watching provides a graceful counterpart to the agitated crowd: "A slim young man tried to vault onto the stage but was almost soundlessly caught just in time by Rob Rominiecki, the director of the museum's notably alert and tactful security staff."[15]

Interestingly, Abramović, who never mentions the young man, speaks of the Acconci piece as one of the hardest to perform because of the kinds of endurance involved. First, since she set as her goal the production of as many orgasms as possible, there was the sheer difficulty of the task. Also, unlike the majority of her own pieces, *Seedbed* required her to use speech to communicate her experience. With only an audio connection to the listeners above, she had to prove her achievement by continuing to speak of and incite her own pleasure for the full seven hours of the performance:

> Having orgasms publicly, being excited by the visitors, steps above me—it's really not easy, I tell you! I've never concentrated so hard in my life. My friend gave me some sexy magazines, but I really didn't use them. I concentrated on the sounds, and on the idea that I had to have orgasms, as proof of my work. And so I did. I don't fake it–I never fake anything. . . . I ended with nine orgasms.[16]

The other difficulty was her isolation from the crowd. "The problem for me with this piece," Abramović later said, "was the absence of public gaze: only the sound."[17] In her own work, the exchange of gazes verifies her sacrifice. The audience also comes in order to be verified, to be seen by the performer who, in the midst of her ordeal, is possessed of an extraordinary authenticity. Starving or in pain, the performer seems to confer something like grace through her gaze. If not grace, her performance is at least an occasion for an exchange of recognition that creates a special bond between the performer and her audience. Abramović describes herself in performance as in an extraordinary, trance-like state of extreme receptivity to the spectators. "I don't have this kind of feeling in real life, but in performance I have this enormous love."[18] Referring to a performance in which she lived, naked and fasting, in a gallery for twelve days, she speaks of a "connection with the eyes" that nourished and healed:

> They project their own sadness onto me and I reflect it back. And I cry out in the saddest way, so they are free. People would come like drunks—instead of a shot of vodka they came to have a shot of this connection with the eyes. The gallery would open at nine,

> and they would come in, look at me for 20 minutes and go away.
> . . . I was thinking that people usually don't look at them in this
> intimate way, so maybe they just needed to be looked at in that
> way before going to work.[19]

Several of the other *Seven Easy Pieces* did feature this cathartic exchange of looks. For instance, in the Valie Export piece, *Action Pants: Genital Panic*, the spectator was confronted by the artist's gaze while in a pose of unapologetic sexual exposure. Abramović replayed Export with machismo, receiving her audience seated on the stage, legs spread pointedly in crotchless leather pants, holding a rifle. That her recreation was, in fact, of a publicity photograph rather than of the performance itself (in which there was no gun) might be considered ironic, but Abramović was not concerned with being rigorously literal. In 1969, Export had walked up and down the aisles of an art cinema in her crotchless action pants, telling people that "what you see now is reality, and it is not on the screen, and everybody sees you watching this now."[20] The original audience apparently left the theatre rather quickly after being confronted with this aggressive reality and the shame of having everybody see them see it. In the 2005 version, the bravado of the original was eventually undermined by Abramović's feminine stillness as she sat and looked out into the audience. By stretching the works to seven hours, Abramović managed to turn every past work into a spectacle of endurance. In *Action Pants*, she assumed long poses, transforming Export's flashing into a series of excruciating stills. Thus she did not capitalize fully on the shock-value of Export's genital show. Instead, she slowed the experience down to the point of sadness: at one point, she locked eyes with a (female) spectator for nearly an hour, during which they both began to cry. The spectator, locked into Abramović's stillness, herself became something of an endurance artist, and the spectacle of that shared, unspecified suffering reportedly mesmerized the crowd.

The Authenticity of Witnessing

If *Seedbed's* utopian resonance lay in its party atmosphere, this was not the case for the self-torture pieces in the *Seven Easy Pieces* cycle, which took place in near silence. Understandably, most accounts credit these pieces as the most difficult, mainly because they require the audience to endure its own desire to watch. The crowd is united in a traditional way in keeping with Aristotelian principles: they have pity for the suffering, and fear for her comfort or even her survival. They also fear for their own predicament as witnesses to such an excessive, unnecessary art. They want and don't want to watch. They are united by curiosity; they are also united by disgust—for the performer and themselves. Writing about a performance by Angelika Festa, in which she hangs in a gallery cocooned in white cloth, Peggy Phelan writes:

> As I watch Festa's exhaustion and pain, I feel cannibalistic, awful, guilty, 'sick.' But after a while another more complicated response emerges. There is something almost obscenely arrogant in Festa's invitation to this display. It is manifest in the 'imitative' aspect of her allusions to Christ's resurrection and his bloody feet, and latently present in the endurance she demands of both her spectator and herself.[21]

In the 1975 performance of *Lips of Thomas*, Abramović drank wine from a glass, broke the glass with her hand, cut a five-pointed star in her stomach, whipped herself, and then lay down on a ice cross while a space heater suspended above caused her to bleed even more. While the original prompted audience members to implore her to stop, to approach her, cover her, and drag her off the cross, thus ending the performance at two hours, this time Abramović took seven hours, piecing out the torture into shorter phases so that there was less chance the audience would fear for her life or try to intervene. Several audience members called out for her to stop, but nobody interrupted the proceedings to forcibly prevent the self-abuse. The presence of Guggenheim security, a condition mentioned by some commentators as significantly altering the piece as it was originally intended, made the event tamer in the sense that there was no need for such an acute degree of spectator alertness as in the original—and thus there was no opportunity for the kind of collaboration that required (or so it seemed) saving Abramović's life in the original. This rescue operation was also lauded as an example of true participation by Steve Dixon in his recent history of media and performance, another reminder of the authenticity revival.

In his blog, David Byrne likens the experience of watching *Lips of Thomas* to an anthropologist's surveillance of "a scarification or a puberty ritual in the outback or in the highlands of Papua New Guinea."[22] In grasping the ritual aspect, he nevertheless misses the audience's primary motive: empathy, and a feeling that can be described as the obligation to witness. "A metronome ticked away," writes Marla Carlson, one of the few to report Abramović's tears: "When the first cut was complete, Abramović blotted it with a white cloth. Slipping her feet into boots that waited nearby, putting on a military cap, and picking up a heavy wooden staff, she stood and cried, her belly heaving, tears streaming down her cheeks as she, and we, listened to a Russian folk song." Carlson states that, although she herself "watched the cutting action unmoved . . . the space became very quiet at those points, no movement, little whispering. On the third cut, someone called out, 'you don't have to do it again.' Obviously others were more disturbed by it than I, and many turned away from the flagellation." The idea of leaving was squelched by the sense of responsibility to the event, something David Byrne's audience has

probably never felt, at least with such intensity. There was a feeling that, since Abramović's purpose was to gift the audience with her sacrifice, no one should in good conscience leave. "I talked to other people who felt, as I did, that we owed it to her to stay."[23] Carlson stayed for the full seven hours.

Ephemerality as Legacy

A common response to Abramović's re-performance cycle, and to the idea of re-performance in general, has been to suggest that it contradicts Phelan's much-debated dictum of 1993: "Performance's only life is in the present."[24] This statement, which reflects Phelan's larger argument about the ephemerality and non-reproducibility of performance, is, in part, an extension of the 1960s stand against representation, including documentation. Abramović speaks for a generation when she states that, in the 1960s, "we decided that we wouldn't make any documentation of our work. It would only exist afterward by word of mouth."[25] The authenticity of the performance event was predicated on its "dematerialization," to use Lucy Lippard's term,[26] such that, as a result, there is little evidence save for some (often purposely unartful) black-and-white photos—photos that fare rather poorly in these days of vivid imaging, at least as realistic representations. In 1999, Jon Erickson suggested that these black-and-white performance photos have a veneer of "mere utility."[27] My sense is that the meaning of black-and-white photography is changing as technology changes, and that, while monochrome film was once less expensive and had a classic or standard look, it is more and more becoming a minority practice that connotes the artistic intentions of the photographer. Thus it is possible to view the performance documents from the 1960s in two ways: both as it might have been viewed in the 1960s and after as utilitarian, unfussy, literal—and, with today's eyes, as inadequate, outmoded, and affected, even artsy. Today's ever-improving technologies rapidly produce the inadequacy of the old—their inadequacy as representation, as a supplement to or replacement of real events. At the same time, though, the enhancements of new technologies produce the old photos' authentic status as artifacts of the 1960s, a lost time.

This sense of their inadequacy has, today, brought many artists, including Abramović, around to stressing the importance of documenting work, especially in their teaching. Abramović states that, at a certain point, she simply changed her mind about documentation. Unlike many of her contemporaries, she was conscious of the professional importance of documentation early on—her mother, the Director of the Museum of Art and Revolution in Belgrade, was a conscientious documentarian. As a result, she has more of a record of her early work than others do who were also working during the 1960s. Yet she felt compelled only recently to work directly in documentary modes. Several years prior she had begun showing *The Biography*, a piece comprised of shortened versions of her most important past performances. "You see my whole life. The performance is condensed, as though they are video

clips." It's a greatest-hits type re-performance event that initiated Abramović's forays into something more like theatre, an association she embraces: "I play these in the context of opera, because opera is the most artificial place. In the '70s we hated theater because of its artificiality. Performance was different."[28]

Seven Easy Pieces was also theatricalized, although not because any of it had been shortened, as in *The Biography*, which reprised each early piece in three or four minutes. The theatricality of *Seven Easy Pieces* was in the predictability of each piece's timing (always seven hours), the presence of museum personnel who ushered the audience in and out, and the use of deluxe, super-sized video projections that, on each night, showed bits from previous evenings behind her as she performed. As part of a documentary being made by 1960s avant-garde filmmaker Babette Mangolte, all the evenings were also rigorously captured from several angles. In light of these developments, it is clear that, whatever there was left in Abramović of the 1960s taste for ephemeral procedures has dissipated. The content of her work continues to be ephemerality—the presence of the performer sharing time and acute experience with an audience—but the form has become more expansive.

I argue that these changes in Abramović's approach to her work and its future are symptomatic of a greater shift in the relationship to representation on the part of the avant-garde, if not a larger group. Although Abramović claims to have had a rather sudden change of heart with regard to documenting and theatricalizing her work, her change of heart did not occur in isolation. Not only have other artists begun to consider the future of their work, but there has been a general rise in interest in the issue of performance documentation among academics. Most provocatively, Phil Auslander's "The Performativity of Performance Documentation" argues for the primacy of documentation itself: "*the act of documenting an event as a performance is what constitutes it as such*."[29] This deconstruction follows the Derridean formula for undermining given beliefs, in this case a belief about cause and effect. In his essay, the temporality of the performance document in relation to the event is strategically reversed, such that the idea of the performance as a causal event is undermined. This argument is useful as a way of destabilizing what Auslander refers to in his book *Liveness* (1999) as *the* performance studies ideology of the live. Auslander is, of course, extending his refutation of Phelan's presence-centered argument, but it also seems clear that he is participating in a broader preoccupation with the past and its preservation. One might also legitimately wonder why this argument, and why now?

One answer to these questions can be found by noticing that this new interest in preserving performance is occurring in relation to 1960s arts specifically rather than to the medium *qua* medium. At the moment, no one is particularly concerned with the preservation of early Dada performance or with the (admittedly better-documented) performances of the 1980s. Auslander, too, takes his examples from the late 1960s and early-to-mid 1970s: Chris Burden, Yves Klein, Vito Acconci.

While it might also be persuasively argued that the appearance of this question of documentation has to do more with an interest in tracking the effects of technology's ever-increasing ability to record and thus preserve sound and image, this singular focus on the artists of a particular period must also be accounted for.

Another, related answer to the question of *why now* is directly related to the aging of the 1960s generation. At some point in the late 1990s, the preservation of a generational legacy began to be a priority, creating a need for the redefinition of the relationship between event and its documentation—and, by implication, of authenticity itself. From this perspective, Phelan's celebration of the ethics of disappearance seems a final articulation of a position that has finally become untenable for the generation that pioneered it. With the rise of a younger generation that has had no exposure to that foundational work, the generation that pioneered the idea of ephemerality as authenticity is having to recognize its limits. Putting aside the idea that we are living at the end of history or in a post-historical moment, the generation that promoted these ideas about the ephemerality and finality of our times is being compelled to recognize the future. For the baby boom generation, the rise of the millennials can only be read as evidence that a future exists in which the boom will not figure, *except in representation*.

Deconstruction's Nostalgia

I have referred to the "theory generation," as if those who came of age after the first wave of the Baby Boom (roughly, in the 1970s), were a generation unto themselves. However, this is a misnomer. Generations are usually understood in twenty-to-thirty year cycles, approximately the same amount of time that it takes for one individual or family to mature and reproduce. A distinction should be made between this biological understanding of generational identity and a group whose identity is based on a shared experience of major events, often traumatic ones. I follow sociologist Bryan S. Turner in calling this last type of group a "cohort."[30]

The generation in academia and the arts who I've referred to as the "theory generation" is thus really a cohort rather than a whole generation. As a result, their identification with the first boomer cohort, the so-called "Generation of '68," is mixed. Today they identify as a generation, though during the years of their coming-of-age, their cohort identity was the stronger. During the 1980s and 1990s, these subversive young intellectuals took on the received ideas of the "hippies." In the effort to distinguish itself, the group made its mark through negation, by deconstructing the authenticity promoted by their direct elders as a means of liberation. Today, however, the first and second cohorts of the boom seem to be coming together so that it is becoming harder to distinguish between them intellectually. So close in their experience of the events of the 1960s (one group in its teens, the other in its twenties), these cohorts are currently cohering in their sense of themselves as a larger generation. With the rise of the millennials,

the generational identity of the boom has become more important. At the same time or as a result of this development, the difference between authenticity and its deconstruction is also fading.

This fading can be seen in Auslander's *Liveness*, in which the deconstruction he deploys against performance authenticity appears to contain nostalgia for the very thing it deconstructs. Auslander interprets the authenticity of live performance as a quality produced through a *process of authentication* that changes as technology changes. Yet his discussion of this process does not quite achieve the kind of objective, value-free position that the phrase "process of authentication" would imply. (That development must wait for the deconstruction of the authenticity of event advanced in his later essay, "The Performativity of Performance Documentation," which is actually a reconstruction of authenticity.) In this earlier thinking-through of the meaning of the live, Auslander displays ambivalence towards authenticity, particularly with regard to its expression in rock music. His ambivalence is, in part, the product of his age: he cannot quite leave behind the value placed on the unprocessed sounds of his youth. This is not a failure on his part, but a reflection of the generational dynamics at work in the return of authenticity.

Liveness begins with a discussion of performance art, and with a deconstruction of the idea that presence is constitutional for performance. Nostalgia appears only in chapters of the book that take on the ideology of the live specific to the field of rock music. The first section dispenses easily with the ideology of authenticity that, as he argues, conceptually undergirds the field of performance studies. Auslander's clear rejection of Phelan's position in *Unmarked*—as well as his affinity for technological reproduction—clearly simplified this deconstruction of the recoil from technology, especially television, on the part of performance artists and scholars. The second section of the book is more ambivalent and complicated, partly because Auslander, although a rock fan, seems uncomfortable with explicitly allying himself with its authenticity. This is true even as he redefines authenticity as produced through an on-going relation of imitation ("remediation") between live rock performance and its broadcast or recording. It seems that, even when authenticity is understood as effect, it retains the moralizing taint of naïveté.

Auslander will admit to being paranoid rather than nostalgic. While he is quick to deconstruct the notion of pure presence that Phelan seems to be promoting, he nevertheless is in accord with her suspicion of mediation as a potential form of manipulation. He admits being paranoid about the machinations of the power behind media to simulate the authentic. Auslander points to MTV's *Unplugged* and also to the Milli Vanilli scandal (in 1990 the duo had their Grammy award taken away when their lip-synching was publicized) as evidence supporting Jean Baudrillard's dark prophecies about the imminent encroachment of simulation on the real. The French philosopher-prophet who found fame, not in his own country but in the U.S. culture of simulation about which he so often wrote, declared in *Simulations* (1983) and

elsewhere that the real was under threat of total assimilation by the copy. Auslander, writing more than fifteen years later, extends Baudrillard's paranoid viewpoint to the point of no reference. "It would seem that the development that Baudrillard treats as a *fait accompli* is actually in the process of occurring." In his astute analysis of the ideological underpinnings of the Milli Vanilli scandal, Auslander concludes that simulation itself may well be coopted as a selling strategy by the powers-that-be. He suggests that the legal case against the duo and the rescinding of the Grammy may have been only a simulation of a confrontation between the guardians of authenticity and the duo, authenticity's simulators. This confrontation, hyped in the media, was actually a form of reality effect that ultimately supports Power–the power of media in a specific sense, as the television industry's legal right to control broadcasts, and the power of media in a general sense, as that which can conceivably control people and things through their representation. Compounding these powers into the abstraction "agency of capital," Auslander explains: "[I]t may be that the implosion of the opposition between live and mediatised performance in popular music . . . was actually a simulation of implosion created by an agency of capital to consolidate and extend its power by recuperating *simulation itself as one of its strategies*."[31]

This understanding of Power as a dark motive behind appearances is part and parcel of authenticity's idealization of an authentic space of non-mediation. Power thus personified gives media the menacing proportions of an unspecified evil that is at once the same as and greater than the corporate managers of record companies or even the companies themselves. It is the intentional and united force of The System, the old and familiar monolith of the 1960s Left.

The problem with the notion of The System is that it needs to be continually resurrected in order for a deconstruction like Auslander's to make sense. It has always seemed to me ironic that deconstruction, as generally practiced in the U.S. academy, rarely turns a critical eye to its own essentializing perception of power. While Derrida's philosophical deconstructions take a mystical perspective, the more common, derivative type of analysis is rationally oriented in its revelation of the "construction of reality." Auslander's *Liveness* is an example of this rational type of analysis, which, although extremely well researched and argued, still seems to require the resurrection of the idea of an overriding Power. Since Auslander is also making an argument that authenticity is a quality that changes, especially in relation to technological innovation, it is hard to imagine that power, too, doesn't change (splinter, falter, diversify).

Yet it would be unfair to judge the whole book as grounded in moralizing paranoia. For the most part, it maintains an objective tone that carefully parses out the construction of liveness as a historically changing category. This fascinating account of the shifting status-relationships between media opens the book beyond the structurally oriented analysis of the manipulations of power. Also, pointing

out that younger generations are less nostalgic for live performance and more accommodating towards mediated experience, Auslander makes room for the suggestion that his own views on simulation are generationally determined and historically specific. He describes the future in terms of the morality of authenticity, as threatened by the insidious creep of media culture and its effect on the young: "when this . . . generation assumes 'power,' the regime of simulation may be in full force, its expansion into and voiding of the realms of the social and the political may be complete."[32] But he also refers to the "new paradigm" that is dawning, led by the youngest generation, whose relationship to mediation is, he says, anxiety free. Almost every chapter of *Liveness* concludes with some form of speculation about these kids, who Auslander describes in one place as the children of first-generation Clapton fans, in other words, of boomers. Doomed to inauthenticity in the eyes of their parental generation (assuming Auslander's view is widespread, which I do), those children about whom he spoke in 1999, now in high school and college, are also the ones who will fill the shoes of the boomers when they retire.

Conclusion: Authenticity in an Expanded Field

"Now and then it is possible to observe the moral life in process of revising itself," wrote Lionel Trilling in *Sincerity and Authenticity* (1970).[33] Trilling's book is about the appearance of sincerity in eighteenth-century French literature and philosophy, and then, in his own time, authenticity's development out of sincerity. The current developments in our moral life, brought on by the pressures of legacy as well as technological advancements and other changes, have been referred to here as a revival or return to authenticity. However, "re-performance" more accurately conveys the sense in which authenticity is coming back, as a performative repetition rather than as a mere reproduction. According to Trilling, the authenticity of the 1960s was an intensification of sincerity's straightforward morality. I suggest that the authenticity currently being re-performed is not a further purification of representation, but a nostalgic and theatrical representation of representational purity that appeals somewhat differently to two generational audiences.

The first is, of course, the same boomer group that watches MTV's *Unplugged* for a taste of the old authentic, acoustic sound. Like the MTV show, re-performance reasserts the era of performance when live performance was placed in clear opposition to media. Yet, because the primary medium of re-performance is the human body—an object whose presence cannot (yet?) be fully simulated by any prosthetic or imaging technology—the form is not read as simulation but as resurrection. Joanna Burton wrote of *Lips of Thomas*, Abramović's re-performance of her own earlier performance, that in its hologram effect she felt she saw the younger Abramović superimposed on the older. Her description of this effect made it out to be quite poignant. Of course, Abramović had aged over thirty years since the original performance. Her self-reproduction was thus both a repetition and a

remnant or souvenir—a metonymic object made all the more poignant because, unlike photographs and digitized music tracks, it is finite and will eventually disappear. Abramović made herself into an authentic souvenir of her own past, and the documentary photographs taken of the performances were also souvenirs, not only of Abramović's past but, considering her re-performance selections, of the past of a whole generation.

The second audience of re-performance is the rising millennial group, for whom the souvenir has no pathos. For the millennials (also sometimes called "echo boomers"), the re-performances are lessons in a practice of aesthetic purity from a member of their parents' generation. In this regard it is noteworthy that, in the interest of her own legacy as well as in nurturing the next generation (which amounts to the same), Abramović has recently quit teaching in order to start a group devoted to endurance work. Called The Independent Performance Group, the group's members will be the students who have stayed with her for several years. One might well wonder if this group will remain devoted to re-performing the works of their teacher or if they will initiate new forms based on her work, ushering in an era of renewed authenticity. One might wonder, as well, what that renewed authenticity would look like—and if Abramović would even recognize it as having any relation to her teaching. After all, the passage of aesthetic authenticity from one generation to the next can only be fraught in a world in which representations are multiplying and becoming more realistic, and in which representational devices are becoming smaller, more powerful, ubiquitous, and diverse. Representations that clearly and less clearly represent other representations are also creating ever finer distinctions that will acquire values as yet unassigned. Undoubtedly the authenticity of the future will be interpreted and recontextualized in ways that render it strange and even illegible to those who launched their careers under the banner of the literal, the nonreproducible, and the plain.

Notes

1. Philip Auslander, *Liveness: Performance in a Mediatized Culture* (London: Routledge, 1999).
2. Peggy Phelan, *Unmarked: The Politics of Performance* (London: Routledge, 1993).
3. Roselee Goldberg, *Performa* (New York: Performa, 2007) 12.
4. Marina Abramović, *7 Easy Pieces* (Milan: Edizioni Charta, 2007) 18.
5. One exception to the silence is by performance artist Joseph Keckler, whose contribution to the online performance magazine *Culturebot* is a hilarious report on *Seven Easy Pieces*. He writes that "someone" in the audience protested that "[s]he's Marina friggin' Abramović. . . . I wanna see her *endure!* We thought that she might really outdo herself, upping the ante . . . to, maybe, giving herself a liver transplant on the stage." 21 Nov. 2005, 16 Jan 2008 <http://culturebot.wordpress.com/2005/11/21/marina-Abramović-at-the-guggenheim/>.
6. Nancy Spector, "Marina Abramović," Guggenheim Museum website 13 Sep. 2007. <http://www.guggenheimcollection.org/site/artist_work_md_1A_2.html >.
7. Patrice Pavis, "Staging Calamity: Mise-en-Scène and Performance at Avignon," tr. Joel Anderson, *Theater* 36.3 (2005): 23.
8. Roberta Smith, "Turning Back the Clock to the Days of Crotchless Pants and a Deceased Rabbit," *New York Times on the Web*. 17 Nov. 2005, 11 Jan. 2008 <http://nytimes.com>.

9. Richard Schechner, *Environmental Theater*, rev. ed. (1973; New York: Applause, 1994) 40.

10. Theresa Smalec, "Not What It Seems: The Politics of Re-Performing Vito Acconci's Seedbed (1972)," *Postmodern Culture* 17.1 (2006). *Project Muse*. University of Notre Dame. 15 Feb. 2008 <http://muse.jhu.edu.lib-proxy.nd.edu>.

11. Some of these transcripts appear in Abramović's book, *7 Easy Pieces*, where it is explained that "[e]very night before each performance started, seven tiny microphones were distributed to some members of the public. The microphones picked up different conversations as the main audience remained unaware" (68).

12. Johanna Burton, "Repeat Performance: Johanna Burton on Marina Abramović's Seven Easy Pieces," *Artforum International* 44.5 (Jan. 2006): 55, University of Notre Dame. 15 Feb. 2008 <http://shakespeare.galegroup.com>.

13. Smalec, "Not What It Seems."

14. Smalec, "Not What It Seems."

15. Smith, "Turning Back the Clock."

16. Karen Rosenberg, "Provocateur: Marina Abramović," *New York*, 5 Dec. 2005, 12 Dec. 2007 <http://nymag.com/nymetro/arts/art/15228/>.

17. Rosenberg, "Provocateur."

18. Laurie Anderson, "Marina Abramović," interview, *Bomb* 84 (Summer 2003), Feb. 16, 2008 <http://www.bombsite.com/issues/84/articles/2561>.

19. Anderson, "Marina Abramović."

20. Abramović, *7 Easy Pieces* 118.

21. Phelan, *Unmarked* 161.

22. David Byrne, "2.25.07: Marina Abramović," 25 Feb. 2007, *Journal*, 11 Jan. 2008 <http://journal.davidbyrne.com/2007/02/22507_marina_ab.html>.

23. Marla Carlson, "Marina Abramović Repeats: Pain, Art, and Theater," Dec. 2005, *Hunter On-Line Theater Review*, 11 Jan. 2007 <http://www.hotreview.org/articles/marinaabram.htm >.

24. Phelan, *Unmarked* 146.

25. Abramović, *7 Easy Pieces* 16.

26. Lucy Lippard, *Six Years: The Dematerialization of the Art Object From 1966 to 1972* (Berkeley: U. of California P, 1973).

27. Jon Erickson, "Goldberg Variations: Performing Distinctions." *PAJ: A Journal of Performance and Art* 21.3 (1999): 98.

28. Janet A. Kaplan, "Deeper and Deeper: Interview with Marina Abramović," *Art Journal* 58.2 (Summer 1999): 6-21, 15 Feb. 2008 <http://findarticles.com>.

29. Auslander, "The Performativity of Performance Documentation," *PAJ 28.3* (2006) 5.

30. Bryan S. Turner and June Edmunds, eds., *Generational Consciousness, Narrative, and Politics* (Oxford: Rowman & Littlefield, 2002).

31. Auslander, *Liveness* 110.

32. 111.

33. Lionel Trilling, *Sincerity and Authenticity* (Cambridge: Harvard U P, 1972).