On the occasion of her show at the Serpentine Gallery (2014), Marina Abramović confirmed that she considers herself as the “grandmother of performance art” (Brockes). She is actually the artist whose work is identified with performance art since its apex period, the seventies, when painting and sculpting were abandoned as the conventional expression of ‘commodity art.’ She also continued to perform during the crisis years of performance art in the eighties, and she brought new ideas to it when it resurfaced at the beginning of the nineties in different and complex forms.

Art history books generally consider the first appearance of performance art as coinciding with the first Futurist Evening, presented at the Teatro Rossetti in Trieste on January, 12th 1910 (Marinetti), when Filippo Tommaso Marinetti and other futurists harnessed the underlying irredentist and nationalist tensions of the town as an additional element in their unrehearsed performance. They declared the tenets of their Manifesto, abusing the audience for its bourgeois values and triggering a riot. Public scuffles, arrests and considerable press coverage became the typical Futurist fare in the wake of the Trieste episode (cf. Goldberg

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1 Marina Abramović 512 Hours, Serpentine Gallery, London from 11 June 2014 to 24 June 2014. Marina Abramović performed in the gallery for the duration of her exhibition: 10 am to 6 pm, six days a week, attracting a total of 129,916 visitors. Bags, jackets, electronic equipment, watches and cameras were not permitted to accompany them.
Their “Technical Manifesto of Futurist Painting” (1910) declared that “the name of ‘madman’ with which it is attempted to gag all innovators should be looked upon as a title of honor.” Futurists regarded the variety theater as the ideal setting for their performances, because it destroyed “the Solemn, the Sacred, the Serious and the Sublime in Art with a capital A” (Goldberg 15).

The wave of action that from the late fifties spread throughout Europe, United States, South America and Japan was directed against those bourgeois values that permeated art in its traditional forms of commodification. An important component in the action was the role played by the camera (at first in photography and then in video in the sixties): it was not only an irreplaceable instrument for documenting events, but it also acted as a mute spectator toward whom the action was addressed and, indeed, it was sometimes the main inspiration behind the action. The artist who first understood the potentiality of photography in action is Yves Klein, whose *Leap into the Void* (1960) is a form of photography that generates a performance: an image of the artist soaring over an empty street with an expression of pure bliss on his face. Down below, a cyclist rides into the distance, unaware of the miraculous occurrence overhead, while at the end of the street a train passes by. This famous photomontage was made by Shunk and his partner, Kender, two official photographers for the group of artists that art critic Pierre Restany named the Nouveaux Réalistes. 2 The photomontage captures the idea of a dream, an illusion or, perhaps, the project of jumping into the void which the printed image made real. Since then, photography became a co-protagonist in performance art, and opened up the way to new potentialities at the end of the eighties—when performance art was rehabilitated after a long period of reversion to traditional art forms. The improvements in recording, developing and printing technology stimulated the rapid growth of cold events: many performances were specifically created for the camera rather than for a live audience—the viewer’s access to the ‘performance’ was exclusively through the photograph. 3 Action became the implicit energy of installations. The persistence of the performance aspect in art continued to be a relevant element although used in a very different manner, where action does not resolve the whole question, and performance becomes theatricality or ‘performativity’ (cf. Parker 95). The term ‘performativity’ brings to mind what in the philosophy of language and speech act theory, are ‘performative utterances’: sentences which not only describe a given context, but also change the context itself. ’Performative utterances,’ J. L. Austin remarks, constitute “doing something rather than merely say-

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2 Shunk first photographed the street empty except for the bicyclist. Then, according to the obituary, Klein “climbed to the top of a wall and dived off it a dozen times—onto a pile of mats assembled by the members of his judo school across the road. The two elements were then melded to create the desired illusion.”

3 The shift from live performance to staged photograph and the reasons behind it are a central anchor to the exhibition *Action—Camera: Beijing Performance Photography*, 16 January to 19 April 2009, The Morris and Helen Belkin Art Gallery, Vancouver, Canada.
ing something” (Austin 137). In the art context, the perlocutionary implication of that doing finds in performance art its being as a living act that transforms, exclusively, in the present.

The etymological origin of the word ‘performance’ derives from ‘forming,’ creating a form as a necessary completion: carrying into effect, fulfilling, discharging, finishing to/through a form.4 Rather than formulating (giving form through concepts, sculpting ideas),5 performing is “to work for a form.” ‘Per’ defines ‘extension.’ Therefore ‘performing’ defines not only duration and persistence but also extension, which is a temporal value as well as a spatial one. ‘Performativity’ puts the emphasis on a conceptual potentiality that implies a metamorphosis, spatial extension, protruding duration, inclusion; in relation to a work of art, it underlines its potential to enlarge space through concepts, or rather perform space through concepts by using objects and/or gestures. Performance and performativity share an original dialectic within Marina Abramović’s work from its very beginning when her art demanded a single conditio sine qua non: in other words, her presence.

*The Artist Is Present* (2010) at the Museum of Modern Art in New York City was the most comprehensive retrospective of Marina Abramović’s work on two different levels: a collection of past forms and a new project: a performance for the Museum, the art space that traditionally collects and archives art forms. Some artists re-performed Marina Abramović’s seminal works, under her direction, challenging the ephemeral nature of an art form that generally survives only in memories or in photographs. In *The Artist Is Present* Marina Abramović spent seven hundred fifty hours seated in MoMA’s atrium during its opening hours, staring with an unwavering glance at the viewers as, one by one, they came up to sit before her after hours of queuing. It was her longest performance ever: she remained silent and still, enduring hunger, thirst and back pain while visitors, confronted by her placid gaze, variously wept, vomited, stripped naked, or proposed marriage.6 Two people: the artist and a person “from the crowd” con-

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4 To perform comes from Middle English *parformen* (1250-1300) < Anglo-French *parformer*, alteration (by association with *forme* form) of Middle French, Old French *parfournir* - to accomplish (par- “completely” + *fournir* “to provide”). Theatrical-musical sense is from 1610. “Perform is the general word, usually implying regular, methodical, or prolonged application or work: to *perform an exacting task*” (“Perform.” Dictionary.com). “The word has been influenced by form; cf. Latin *performare* - to form thoroughly. 1. To carry through; to bring to completion; to achieve; to accomplish; to execute; to do. ’I will cry unto God most high, unto God that performeth all things for me’ (Ps. Lvi.2). ‘Great force to *perform* what they did attempt’ (Sir P. Sidney). 2. To discharge; to fulfill; to act up to; as, to perform a duty; to perform a promise or a vow. ‘To *perform* your father’s will’ (Shak). 3. To represent; to act; to play; as in drama. ‘Perform a part thou hast not done before’ (Shak) (“Perform.” Webster’s).

5 Joseph Beuys speaks extensively about the word “formulate” as justifying the origins of art (art-making) from words in the video-documentary *Joseph Beuys: Transformer*.

6 The documentary film *Marina Abramović: The Artist is Present* reconstructs perfectly the whole performance.
fronetd each other in a secular confession that relied not on words, but in an exchange of energies: one actor—one spectator, a precept that Jerzy Grotowsky considered as the basis for his “poor theater.” However the word “theater” here is not pertinent because there is no “enactment,” nor “acting,” but “action”: time transformed into a visual icon.

Marina Abramović’s first experiments with “re-performance” took place at the Guggenheim Museum for her Seven Easy Pieces show (2005) in which she re-performed (and reinterpreted) five performance art classics: Bruce Nauman, Body Pressure (1974); Vito Acconci, Seedbed (1972); Valie Export, Action Pants: Genital Panic (1969); Gina Pane, The Conditioning, First Action of Self-Portrait(s) (1973); Joseph Beuys, How to Explain Pictures to a Dead Hare (1965); together with her seminal work Lips of Thomas (1975) and a new piece: Entering the Other Side (2005). Each performance lasted seven hours, the whole performance cycle lasted seven days. She explicitly chose to re-perform other artists’ performances put on between 1960 and 1970—a period that is crucial in the history of performance and about which there is very little documentation apart from accounts by ocular witnesses. What then are the sources she worked on?

What happened to the spectators when they watched re-enactments of performances that had previously plunged the observers into crises, transferring them into a state of liminality? In order to be able to answer this question we must first clarify the status of the re-enactments. The title Seven Easy Pieces is undoubtedly reminiscent of titles of musical pieces such as the Easy Pieces by Beethoven, Bartók, Stravinsky, or Lloyd Cole. Or the film Five Easy Pieces by Rafelson. Or even the book Six Easy Pieces by Richard Feynman. Along these lines, the performances were advertised to the public in a notice published by the museum where it was stated that Marina Abramović would “interpret” the past performances of her colleagues and herself “as one would a musical score.” But does it really make sense to compare the re-enactment of performances to playing music according to a score? In a score, the composer has written down the notes through which he wants to convey his intention of how the music should sound on the basis of the instruments being played and the skill of the musicians all of whom follow the composer’s score. Performance Art, on the other hand, depends on an event that is, by its very nature transitory, ephemeral—something that cannot be repeated. What is left of the performance are traces of it or documentation on it—in some cases, an object the performer used, or comments by him on the performance; photographs and sometimes even film recordings that have been taken during the performance; reviews on the performance or other reports about it delivered by various kinds of participants. Neither the traces nor the documents can claim a status comparable to that of a musical score. They are able to arouse memories and images that refer to certain moments of the performance or other kinds of associations, ideas, etc. But by no means do they serve as instructions. (Fischer-Lichte in Marina Abramović: 7 Easy Pieces, 40-41)

7 Jerzy Grotowsky’s fortune in art is also related to the radical conceptualism of Germano Celant’s Arte Povera.

8 Seven Easy Pieces, Guggenheim Museum, New York City, 9-15 November 2005, from 5 pm to 12 pm.
Is it possible for a performance to be re-performed by a different artist, a different body, in a different historical time, with different objects, especially when scant information about the original work is available? How can a performance be considered a text that can be repeated, reanimated, quoted and/or re-performed by either the artist him/herself or by other artists? Abramović’s Seven Easy Pieces shows that performances can be re-interpreted departing from the unique, time-based elements upon which much performance art has been based. Her work derives its legitimation from a visual text that writes itself during the actual performances and is collectively shared in ocular, oral and (partly) written testimonies. The “score” of the performance as Erika Fischer-Lichte calls it, is a moving icon with blurred edges to which the artist gives a new body. The “grandmother of performance art” moved from those first steps in reinterpreting performance art to a further development when, in 2010, she decided to work for a Foundation for Preservation of performance art at MAI (the Marina Abramović Institute), Hudson, New York (cf. Abramović, Mai). It is the first institution devoted to cataloguing, archiving and propagating performances. The Architectural form of the Museum, the Foundation offers performance art a tangible place where the borderless space of performances acquires a well defined form.

More than other performance artists, Abramović’s work deals with spatial issues. In her works with Ulay, the concern about how the self relates to space, translated into performances that explore the relationship between the physical body and architecture, is determinant. Since 1975 Marina Abramović and Ulay have engaged in a series of actions in which pain and risk are largely present. Their seminal works are Relation in Space (1976), Relation in Time (1977), Imponderabilia (1977), Interruption in Space (1977), and Extension in Space (1977). Relation in space was presented in Venice in July 1976: in an empty room two naked bodies clashed frontally, at full speed, over and over again. In Relation in Time they are back to back knotted together by their long hair: two opposites pulling in opposite directions. In Interruption in Space, Abramović and Ulay ran towards each other from different directions and collided into each other as though there was a wall between them. In Expansion in Space they tried to expand their bodies in the space by moving two large columns of one hundred forty and one hundred fifty kilos respectively.

[That] piece was very important because there was an audience of almost one thousand people. It was the first time that we experienced what the energy of the audience means and we went over our limits—physically and mentally. (Abramović, “Body Art” 33)

Imponderabilia (1977) is probably their most famous piece: the artists’ image of themselves becoming the door at the Galleria Comunale d’Arte Moderna in Bo-

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9 Ulay is the pseudonym of the artist Frank Uwe Laysiepen. He has been partner in Marina Abramović’s art and life from 1976 to 1988.
logna is probably the most widely published in art history books. On that occasion the artists stood facing each other naked in the main entrance so that visitors entering the museum would have to choose which one of the two to face. All these performances deploy architectural space to create complex situations of endurance, in which the body performs in close intimacy with the formal architectural elements of the gallery, often as if it were part of the architecture itself.

Empty space is the zero degree of art: as Yves Klein showed with his exhibition at the Iris Clert Gallery (April 1958), where he exhibited nothing but an empty space: “nothingness.” The exhibition was entitled _La spécialisation de la sensibilité à l’état matière première en sensibilité picturale stabilisée, Le Vide_ where the only presence in the gallery was a large cabinet with every surface painted white. An elaborate entrance procedure was staged for the opening night, when three thousand people were queuing up (thanks to an extensive publicity campaign), waiting to be let into an empty room. That show at the Clert Gallery changed the nature of exhibiting, showing the borders of a screen where action is entrapped in the tradition of exhibitions; performers consider the screen a limit that needs to be overcome by putting on performances in non conventional spaces, or in private spaces, only for the camera. The outer border in performance art is substituted by an object placed in between. Even in the starkest performance there is something in between which delineates a limit to be overcome. This limit is not the theater stage, but an avoidable distance from the everyday.

In _The Artist Is Present_, a table is what is in between. Marina Abramović stated that she had projected other solutions for the performance, but the table was always ‘present’: it was unavoidable. Probably because it incarnates that ‘something in between.’ A black table was also present in one of the last performances she shared with Ulay, the one in which she and he decided to share each other.

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10 For that occasion a catalog documenting the performances was published. Cf. _La performance oggi_.

11 Abramović talks extensively about the installation at the MoMA in the documentary film _Marina Abramović: The Artists Is Present_.

12 Abramović and Ulay first came to Australia in 1979 for the third Biennale of Sydney. Inspired by a brief trip to Central Australia, they returned in 1980 to spend five months in the Australian outback. Traveling between various Aboriginal communities, they spent long periods alone in the desert, much of the time sitting in the shade in silence, exhausted by the heat of the day. Unlike many of their joint performances that involved a form of mental communication and mutual trust to create unity in front of an audience, they were now alone. It was during their time in the Australian desert that they first conceived the performance _Gold Found by the Artists_ that was to become the first of a series of twenty-two performances collectively titled _Nightsea Crossing_ staged in various locations around the world between 1981 and 1986. For the first performance, the artists sat opposite each other at a table in silence, for the seven hours that the gallery was open to the public, every day for sixteen days. Abramović was dressed entirely in black and Ulay in red. Between them on the black painted table were two hundred fifty grams of gold nuggets, which they had found in the desert, an Aboriginal boomerang covered in twenty-four-carat gold leaf and a live diamond-back python. After each day they returned directly to their lodgings and consumed nothing but water: endurance performances often involve fasting as a way of purifying the body and in some cases where a performance goes for
The documentary *Marina Abramović: The Artist is Present* features her encounter with Ulay, after nearly twenty-five years of separation, during her performance at MoMA as the most moving event: she opens her eyes to the new spectator sitting in front of her and recognizes the total correspondence of art and life in her past: an implicit tenet of performance art. For a few minutes, the table in between returned to being a private border inside her intimacy, her private space. Such liminality is another *conditio sine qua non* of performance art; indeed it is arguably its innermost core.

Since in the space-in-between we are able to leave our old patterns of behavior and ways of living, we find ourselves in a permanent state of traveling. We are always in the space-in-between, like airports, or hotel rooms, waiting rooms or lobbies, gyms, swimming pools . . . all the spaces where you are not actually at home . . . This is where our mind is the most open. We are alert, we are sensitive and destiny can happen . . . [this] means that we are really completely alive and that is an extremely important space. (Rico 50)

The definition Marina Abramović gives of that ‘something in between’ is close to what Marc Augé defined as ‘non place,’ a space that is not anthropologically connoted, a neutral space for circulation, consumption and communication (cf. Augé). The table in between is the performative element that communicates that the event is happening; it denotes that a performance is on even if nothing is going on. It is an architectural element that defines directions, positions, shows distances or maybe helps shorten them. During the last weeks of *Artist Is Present* the table disappeared. The audience, the social body had absorbed or conceptualized that distance which dissolved in an invisible condition.

The condition of crossing borders is implied in all performances. The last limit is the body, it is there that the condition exists: the internal and the external, flesh, skin. Performance art shows that body-ness is a continuous ‘becoming.’ This is manifest in the self-mutilation performances of Marina Abramović, Gina Pane and Chris Burden (amongst others) in the seventies. Abramović’s flesh appears in the five-pointed star carvings and her whip lashes in *Lips of Thomas* which she performed in 1975. The flesh appears here as an ultimate presence and reality that cannot be transcended. With the evidence of blood, flesh shows the signs of pain, and the audience’s inclination to contextualize flesh as representation is curbed; the semiotic distinction between subject and object and between performer and recipient gets to an existence level, an ‘out of body’ experience becomes an ‘out of art’ experience: it signals its ineffability. In performances the triangle body-flesh-blood represents at its most profound “the totally direct transmission of energy” that each performance wishes to achieve (Denegri 33).

days at a time, it is necessary for purely practical metabolic purposes. The culmination of these performances was their final work together, *The Lovers: The Great Wall Walk 1988*, which marked their mutual decision to separate.
[Masochistic artists of the seventies] defied pleasure in the most easily misinterpreted manner possible: by presenting and representing pain through the material of their own bodies. In the process, these artists nullified the expectation that pleasure should accompany pain, and anticipated response so deeply engrained that it sometimes allows the viewer to avoid dealing with the complexity of an individual's choice to endure pain. The performance artists of the 1970s proved that if there is any pleasure whatsoever attainable in masochism, it has to do with alienation. (O'Dell 13)

In the eighties Abramović's new performances took a step out of the flesh, and her performing acquired a bi-dimensional status shifting from performance to performativity. Photography comes into its own. Abramović is present in frozen images that imply action, or rather are built on a historical background made up of actions that now emancipate the body from the living motion. These changes, take performativity to new levels: any detail can take on a symbolic meaning. It is because of the decisive role played by photography that the original border defined by the flesh, now moves to attire.

In my work clothes are mostly uniforms and have a very precise purpose. I never used fashion strictly speaking in my performances because I consider art and fashion two separated fields. In “The Abramović Method” for example, the gowns are those classic ones that you can find anywhere. They served to distinguish people exercising from the general audience participating as spectators. In other cases however clothes have a completely different meaning. In The Artist Is Present, for example, I used the same dress in three colors: during the first month it was blue, to calm me down, then red, to give me strength in moments of weakness, during the last month it was white, to transmit purity. In Crossing Nightsea me and Ulay were changing the color of our clothes every week. According to the Vedic culture, we had studied in India, every color transmits a different energy: if you wear green robes everybody will talk to you, the blue relaxes you, black or white will make you appear neutral, red will give you strength, yellow acts seriously on your nervous system. It’s just a code, and painters, in particular the American abstract artists, understood the power that certain color combinations have on the human psychology and have used certain colors to elicit certain feelings, reactions. Rothko was a master in this sense, but I think about Klein as well with his Blue (IKB - International Klein Blue). (Nobile Mino)

The new performances design an ontological space that recalls her past actions. Stillness and silence are not new issues in her work. Some examples are already present in For Project—Empty Space (1971) where she set up a circular projection of a panoramic sequence of large black and white images of Belgrade around the walls of a small room. As the sequence progressed, the photographs showed less and less of the city, until the final image revealed only people in an open space. In Spaces (1973), Abramović explored further this transformative relationship between “space” and “self” through a performance, during which she encountered seven empty rooms in the Museum of Contemporary Art in Zagreb and translated her feelings through metronomes placed on the floor of each room. Her preoccupation with the idea of space as ‘empty’ or ‘liberated’ in the early works is to be interpreted as her search, not only to represent the abstract concepts of the
‘immaterial’ and the ‘infinite,’ but also to explore the interrelationship of the self to those concepts as a form of performativity. Other witnesses of that stillness are the “transitory objects,” motionless objects that perform the empty space.

In this work, since the artist is removed, the transitory objects, as I call them, have to function in my place in order to trigger the experience of others. I set up everything in such a way that my presence is not needed. There is also the question of mortality. What happens when the artist is dead? We have to depend on our own resources and not the resources of the artist anymore. I feel that I have to prepare this transitional stage for the public to take over and still have the experience, as I used to, in this kind of installation. (Kosmidou 42)

Such objects cannot be considered as scenography (theater) nor sculpture (art). Abramović says about the difference between her transitory objects and sculpture:

They are not separate from life; you can enter them. They are small settings that have to be used. Unlike the minimal object, they demand some kind of participation. Rejection of detachment, therefore, and attraction. These objects are not self-sufficient; they seek an interlocutor in order to become active, almost “incandescent.” (Celant 11)

Transitory objects are the spark that lights the gasoline in performances and opens the way to the process of action, encounter, confrontation, interaction—an active body that moves other bodies—that is the kernel of performance art. Out of action is performance art in the seventies, because the word action implied political action and political transformation.

. . . the term “action” keeps the pressure on the political reference inherent in the term activism that was, and remains, so central to the use of the body as a medium. Action was a term that reflected a highly determined strategy for artistic intervention in public life. Action in art was imagined as a means to remedy the aestheticism that transformed art as an integral part of the production of meaning in culture into the empty category of “art for art’s sake,” a shift in the social role of art that robbed art of its cultural efficacy in favour to its surface appearance prized as a prestigious emblem of status and taste. (Schimmel and Stiles 234)

Photography keeps those actions alive. Performance photography transformed into tangible and unmovable data those actions, imaginations and energies. Performance art photography played a determinant role in their appreciation, not only for their becoming an historical witness but also because they keep a fragment of that event not only visually, as O’Dell declares:

In a larger sense, any understanding of the photographic documentation of performance depends on the way it supplements visual responses. For one thing, the photographs allow for an ongoing (if fragmentary) experience of a performance on the part of a beholder. Unlike reproductions of other types of artworks, photographs of performances, by virtue of their focus on the artist’s body, allow the viewer to engage with the artist in a haptic as well as visual sense. Encountering the shared ontology of the body makes the viewer mindful of his or her own physical presence as witness to the
pictured event (even if it is well after the fact). One’s involvement in the event—the choice to become a ‘contracted partner’—is thus made tangible. This contracted partnership is made manifest by the visual and haptic dynamics that one experiences is literally ‘handling’ the performance photographs. (O’Dell 13, 14)

The (motionless) sculpture-like performances of the eighties demonstrate that photography is more than a transparent recorder of reality: “It is a mode of representation and, in the visual realm, a cultural dominant.” Lambda print photography wraps low definition events in high definition images, it inspires the creation of settings, the presence of a pre-organized set of signs: it increases reality in details, amplifies reality in bit resolution.

**Anima Mundi**, a two section performance that Abramović put on in 1983, is an example of how high definition photography influenced performances. In the first section, Ulay stands at the top of a flight of stairs, while Abramović is on the ground, some distance away. They are standing motionless, with their arms reaching out to each other. They hold this position until Abramović’s shadow climbs the stairs and joins Ulay’s. The second section shows Abramović sitting on the topmost stair, with her red dress spread out around her. Ulay, dressed entirely in white, is lying crosswise over her lap: his body forms an ‘M’ (Marina - Holy Mary?). With Ulay lying across Abramović’s lap, the association with the Deposition of Christ is inevitable. **Anima Mundi** involves the “sacred” and the “sublime” that drew the Futurists to performing acts. The photography that captures the event probably represents the only sacred image that there is in Marina Abramović’s work: her interpretation of Michelangelo’s *La Pietà*. The title **Anima Mundi** relates the work to neo-platonic thinking (Plato) while the traditional Medieval iconography is reduced to a dialectic of colors: Abramović wears a red dress, while Ulay is totally in white. This is a clear reference to the fusion of a drop of female menstrual blood and a drop of sperm that Chinese mythology considers as the origin of the Universe (Birrell 33). Mari(n)a here is contemplative, neither in disppear, nor in pietas. Photography is the quintessential partner, as it suspends time within the action and makes reality correspond to the image. It recalls a question that Jean-François Lyotard poses in his reading of the sublime in Barnett Newman’s paintings (Newman): *Is it happening?* “[sublime art] confronts the possibility of nothing happening” (Lyotard 198) and becomes itself the event (*Ereignis*) that holds this possibility in suspense. From ‘performance’ to ‘performativity’ time becomes an *aporia*, a creation of the mind that art cannot transform into an image, but can exploit for its perlocutionary force:

The avant-gardist task remains that of undoing the presumption of the mind with respect to time. The sublime feeling is the name of this privation (Lyotard 211).

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13 On the subject see Bezzola.

14 **Anima Mundi** was performed in Bangkok, Thailand, in February 1983.
At MoMA, Marina Abramović presents her iconographic body in history, in the Museum, in memories, in the present, in presence, and shares with us the collective possibility of taking the sting out of the barb of time.
WORKS CITED


