

TIME · SPACE · EXISTENCE

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Text as presented during the symposium Time Space Existence at Palazzo Cavalli Franchetti in Venice, Italy, 4 June 2009



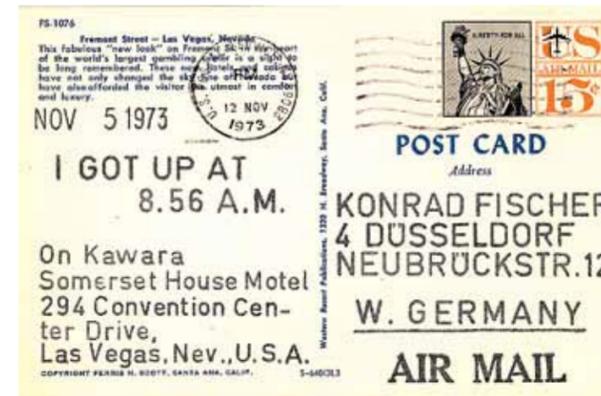
After the trilogy of the *Personal Structures* Symposiums on the subjects of 'Time', 'Space' and 'Existence' in Amsterdam, New York, and Tokyo it would appear that this Venetian epilogue on the theme of 'Matter' is a little out of place. Whereas space, time, and existence designate general, empirical pre-conditions, matter seems to be an object of perception, sensually perceptible materiality, which we know intimately. And in fact: time and space are not empirical facts, we may not perceive them. Rather each and every perception presupposes them. This is the reason why Kant referred to them as 'forms of intuition'. And neither is existence a mere empirical fact we may be sure of beyond any doubt. Descartes' *Meditationes* as the foundation charter of modern philosophy show the great methodical and argumentative efforts one must make in order to prove beyond a doubt what seems to be such a simple fact of existing. His "ego cogito, ego existo" however, did not hold up as a staunch and reliable basis, as a *fundamentum inconcussum* for the subsequent philosophy, especially since Nietzsche. For the existential philosophy of Heidegger or Sartre, for example, existence (i.e., human existence) may only be described as a dynamic structure, ultimately as a highly complex process.

Matter, or respectively, material—both meanings being inherent to the English term 'matter'—on the other hand, appears to be a tangible, empirical reality. The everyday definition goes something like this: Matter is everything that has mass and volume, i.e. takes up space. But for centuries we have been living in a scientific culture that has not been dealing with the mere appearance of things, but rather vehemently and with the greatest effort, desires to know what things really are. The question as to what matter actually is, we are fully justified in saying, has been the central task of research for the natural sciences in the last hundred years. We must acknowledge the results it has produced as a revolution—and we ask ourselves how our entire culture would change if these results and their implications with all their consequences were indeed generally internalized.

The research explications of what we think we intuitively know about matter has been correctly determined by philosopher Peter Sloterdijk as follows: "The higher the degree of explication, the more intense the possible, even unavoidable strangeness of the newly acquired knowledge." What physics knows today about the

essence of what we naively refer to as matter, is actually utterly strange. I do not pretend to dispose over specialist knowledge, but only wish to list a few facts about which, granted, we as educated people have heard, but as a rule our power of imagination does not suffice to "grasp this knowledge" adequately. That matter consists of atoms is something we learned when we were still at school, "although" as Sloterdijk says, "the much quoted atoms, these epistemological contemporaries of the 20th century, are for me still on the same level as unicorn powder and the influences of Saturn"—in other words, pure superstition. And the fact that the atoms are in no way a-tomos, non-fissionable, is something that the 20th century has revealed with all its dramatic results: Atom bombs as well as nuclear power plants owe their efficiency to this fact. That the so-called atoms may certainly be split, and indeed to the extent that the so-called elementary particle may no longer be described as 'particles', but if at all as a dynamic haze of relations and probabilities, this fact runs fundamentally counter to our assumptions regarding the substantiality of substance. And this to such a degree that a physicist as renowned as Hans Peter Dürr could declare without hesitation: "I have spent 50 years—my entire life in research—with the question concerning what lies beyond matter. The final result is very simple: There is no matter."

And now, what does all of this have to do with art? On the surface, absolutely nothing! But indirectly the transformations the concept of matter has been undergoing in the natural sciences have had an undeniable effect on art, and have been reflected in it. One early example is the attempt the early Cubist theorists such as Apollinaire, Gleizes, and Metzinger made to justify this painting style by referring to the most recent research, most notably, the theory of relativity, the discovery of the 'fourth dimension', etc.—often in an odd mix between popular science and wild speculation. Another example would be the Informel painters after World War II, who directly or indirectly tried to introduce the experience of nuclear fission, the transformation of matter into energy ($E=mc^2$), with their destructive and yet fascinating aspects, into their dynamic structural painting. Of course, the themes of matter and material bear special relevance to the area of sculpture. The ultimately Aristotelian notion that sculpture brings together form and matter, i.e. accomplishes the spiritual forming of a material that has no form per se, a material



which is ideally durable, potentially 'everlasting', and hence with a stable form such as bronze or stone, had become invalidated with the emergence and dynamization of the concept of matter. The development of this artistic process, which was launched at the latest with Picasso's Cubist sculptures, is known.

No longer considering matter to be merely the substrate of a form process, but rather making visible the energetic potential of the materials themselves, and giving them heretofore unknown artistic forms was the program of a wholly new understanding of sculpture beginning in the 1960s. The name Joseph Beuys deserves mention here before all others in terms of the attentiveness to energetic (and emotional) processes, which may be connected to the characteristics of the material. Best known is Beuys's predilection for using fat as a material, which had never before found use in sculpture. Here the commentary by the artist: "My initial intention in using fat was to stimulate discussion. The flexibility of the material appealed to me particularly in its reaction to temperature changes. This flexibility is psychologically effective—people instinctively feel it relates to inner processes and feelings. The discussion I wanted was about the potential of sculpture and culture, what they mean, what language is about, what human production and creativity are about. So I took an extreme position in sculpture, and a material that was very basic to life and not associated with art." As we already notice from this quotation, the physical properties of the material—in this case fat—are so generalized by Beuys that it may become a metaphor for artistic, cultural, even social and political processes. It is not my intention to enter into a discussion of Beuys's concept of art here, but I do want to mention one example of the fact that certain physical research results have been adopted in art. In 1965 Beuys set up a text listing a whole series of scientific and semi-scientific concepts, each forced into the equation with the equal sign "= human (h)": "Bender of space = the human (h) / Bender of time = the human (h) / (...) Creator of substance = the human (h)", etc. Concepts such as impulse, field, quantization, energy, matter, and causality are identified with the human and the addition (h). This h is known to us from physics as the Planck constant, which holds a fundamental role in quantum theory as a physical constant. By equating this constant and with humans, Beuys demonstrates his anthropocentric approach focused entirely upon the creative potential of humans.



Let us bear in mind: The revolutionary development of the physical picture of matter has also been reflected in the artistic treatment of the material. Granted, this is not in the sense of an "illustration" of physical research, but in the sense of a sensitivity towards the material using the physical and chemical characteristics as form potentials and as energetic (also emotional) centers of power. Only through this change in the scientific concept of matter, it would appear, has the boundless expansion of the use of material become possible in art, which literally comprises the entire spectrum from shit (such as the *Merda d'artista* by Piero Manzoni) to gold (for example, as used by James Lee Byars). As a radical example of the concept of matter extended completely into the Energetic, which is certainly not only found in Beuys's works, we need only think back to an exhibition by Robert Barry in 1969, in which the exhibition room was 'filled' only with radio waves. That Barry actually regarded the waves as material is proven by a statement made by the artist: "The carrier waves have several very beautiful qualities. For example, they travel into space with the speed of light. They can be enclosed in a room. The nature of carrier waves in a room—especially the FM—is affected by people. The body itself, as you know, is an electrical device. Like a radio or an electric shaver it affects carrier waves. The carrier waves are part of the electromagnetic spectrum of which light waves are also a part. A carrier wave is a form of energy. Light waves are made of the same material as carrier waves, only they are of a different length. A person is also a source of some kind of a carrier wave. Let me call that telepathy."

The fact that light itself became an artistic material, for Dan Flavin, and later for Keith Sonnier, Robert Irwin, and others, is sufficiently known. Here, considering the exhibition that is taking place in this institute [*Glass Stress*], I would like to speak of a material which interacts with light like no other, and is thus particularly able to make visible the new energetic definition of the concept of matter, namely glass. Glass is at once entirely connected with two elementary metaphors of the western notion of pictures: what I mean here are the notions known to us in art theory since the renaissance of the picture as an open window and as a mirror. That glass was, and is, used for both, the window as well as the mirror, needs no further elaboration—but what is remarkable is

that glass, despite its sheerly overused connection with basal image metaphors, has never become a major material for artistic work. I do not wish to speculate here about the reasons for this, but would merely like to point out that glass, at least in the short period of the early 13th century, was the material and medium of one of the most advanced genres of its time, namely the high-gothic glass window with its extremely complex picture stories. That the church window recently became a hotly debated medium once again, is one of those strange phenomena of the Post-Modern Era. When the window in the south transept of the Cologne Cathedral was glazed according to a design by Gerhard Richter with 10,5000 squares in 72 colors in a random order, a passionate debate arose concerning how much obligation to content contemporary art could create.

Of all things, this is how a work of glass painting became a test case for the question as to whether or not contemporary art could still convey religious messages and in addition, activate social bonding powers.

Even though glass, as I mentioned, was never the preferred material of the Modern, still it certainly has played an important role at several pronounced and significant turning points of artistic development. Precisely where the concern was for the transition from painting as the leading medium of modern art to a conceptual understanding of art, it is interesting to note that glass repeatedly emerges as a working material. One of Duchamp's major works, the famous *La mariée mise à nue des ses célibataires, même*, done from 1915 to 1923, was notably carried out on glass, and is often simply referred to as *The Large Glass*. This is Duchamp's attempt to break free from the painter's signature, to leave "retinal art" with its total focus on the visual, behind. Duchamp is supposed to have said in retrospect in 1958, "I used glass because in this respect there are no prejudices. A painter, who leaves the canvas blank, still places something before the viewer that is understood as an object per se. It is different with glass: except in relationship to space and the viewer, you do not linger before the blank places." The parts of the picture where the colorless glass may be seen thus dissolve the object character of the painting and function as relational hinges, as connecting elements to space and the viewer.

Precisely this characteristic of glass, namely, of remaining more or less "invisible" and as a result playing a functional part in the reception, occurs again in the concept art of the likes of Joseph Kosuth in the 1960s. By this it becomes immediately evident how much Kosuth owes to Duchamp's notion of art. His early works with glass such as the *Leaning Glasses* and the glass boxes (each 1965) take up the aesthetics of minimalism, the simple geometric forms, for example the cubes of Sol LeWitt or Donald Judd, the leaning of things against the wall of artists such as John McCracken (who actually began to make his color-planks one year later, 1966), as well as the repetition of identical forms. But where Kosuth's works fundamentally differ from Minimal Art is in his use of language, the words written on the objects of glass. They refer—tautologically—to the work itself and name nouns and adjectives we assume when we look at the objects: box, cube, empty, clear, glass as well as glass, words, material, described. The 'described' indicates that we never simply

view things. Viewing cannot take place without descriptive concepts. We always use concepts in order to be able to perceive as a certain something at all what we perceive visually. Having elevated this fact of the unavoidable weave of viewing and concept into an artistic statement is the achievement of Kosuth's conceptual work. Colorless glass is an ideal material in this undertaking because it takes a background position, and because of this, its object-like character is visually strongly reduced anyway. As with Duchamp, it opens the work of art in terms of the relationship to space and the viewer. It is worth taking a moment to point out the parallels to physical research. Just as quantum physics dissolves the concept of "matter" into a dynamic "relational structure" (Hans-Peter Dürr), Concept Art also transforms the work of art into a relational structure consisting of language and visual elements. This is why Kosuth declared the context to be his actual material. In this respect, "context" is not only the exhibition space and the institutional framework within which a work of art is shown and reviewed, but also the cultural context, i.e. all elements being included into a culturally defined relationship (philosophy, language, history, etc.).

All of the artistic procedures, which I have quickly pointed out here, the energetic notion of matter with Beuys, the dissolution of the notion of material into the immaterial (with Barry) or in contextuality and language (with Kosuth) have in turn themselves become 'material' for many artists to work on further since the 1960s. One pronounced example of how minimalistic forms, a certain conceptual procedure, but also making light and color a theme (for which Gerhard Richter's cathedral window is a further marked example) all find their ways together in an idiosyncratic oeuvre may be witnessed in the work of the American artist Roni Horn. The fact that she has repeatedly worked with glass in recent years is remarkable in this connection. Her floor objects of colored glass make a theme of the energetic aspect of glass and light, the interplay between transparency, opacity, and reflection, depending upon the viewer's perspective and the light situation. There are also the age-old metaphors of the picture: The window and the mirror return in her works in an unexpected form. About her two-part blue object *Blue by Blue* of 2007, she says characteristically: "The experience of blue unlike most colours is always half you. So this is a pair that is both mirror and window. The window contains the view of blue. The mirror reflects the blue in you."

Matter, material, and its characteristics have been individual parameters of artistic work since the 1960s at the latest. Form and content do not suffice, material has taken on an equal role for the quality and meaning of works of art. It seems vital to me for our experience of the world that the scientific research of matter be supplemented by an artistic research of it. That glass with its diverse properties and its fascinating capacity to unite the most varied qualities will increasingly play a role as an artistic material in addition to its functional and handicraft importance is something we may safely assume.



RENE RIETMEYER

Text as presented during the symposium Time Space Existence at Palazzo Cavalli Franchetti in Venice, Italy, 4 June 2009

Rene Rietmeyer (1957, Netherlands) creates 'Boxes'. With their material, size, color and texture, they address time, space and existence.*

The subjective use and perception of matter

Matter, Material, Materiality

Around 450 BC the Greek philosopher Empedocles proposed one of the first theories that attempted to describe the things around us. He argued that all matter was composed of four elements: fire, air, water, and earth. He thought that the ratio in which these four elements were combined, decided the properties of all matter and after we died, we would turn into fire, air, water and dust again. Approximately 50 years later another Greek philosopher named Democritus realized that if you would take a stone and break it into two pieces, each part would still have the same property values as the stone from before the splitting. He came to the conclusion, that if you would continue to break the stone into ever smaller pieces, eventually you would come to a piece, that would be so small, that the piece itself, could no longer be divided into two parts anymore. He called these smallest possible pieces: atomos. Aristotle and Plato, rejected the theories of Democritus. Aristotle accepted the 'fire, air, water, earth' theory of Empedocles, and because Aristotle had many people who believed in him, the theory of Democritus would have to wait almost another 2,000 years before being rediscovered. Proving that, both Aristotle and Plato, could be seriously wrong sometimes as well.

Especially in the last hundred years we have to come to the conclusion that this subject is even much more complex and difficult to understand as it seemed. In praxis however, almost all artists are not concerned with the latest developments in the research of matter, and I, myself, honestly cannot understand the latest findings anymore as well. I can therefore only touch the surface from the physical discoveries and ongoing philosophical discussions. Kant tried to explain the difference between matter, material, and substance. Marx and Hegel tried to explain the differences between, material and content and material, latest from that point on, was not just a physically present object anymore, it became to have meaning. In the late twentieth century, Heidegger's thoughts gave way to the use of the word 'materiality', and Clement Greenberg, as an art critic, made an enormous effort to redefine the value of the work of art and discussed



thereby the significance of physicality in visual arts. Michael Fried claimed: "the materials do not represent, signify or allude to anything; they are what they are and nothing more." Material that had been only part of the form of the art work, as opposed to being part of the content or meaning of the art work, this material now did become an important factor of the meaning of the art object itself.

Over the years many philosophers and even scientists have come to many different opinions and since art is no science, artists have taken the freedom to believe in, and express what, they subjectively like best. An artist simply does not have the time and understanding capability anymore to deal with this subject as intensively as specialist researchers do. We therefore can only include a very limited knowledge within our works, which makes our use of questions concerning matter within our art works even more subjective, and as long as we do not pretend that we know, there is nothing wrong with that.

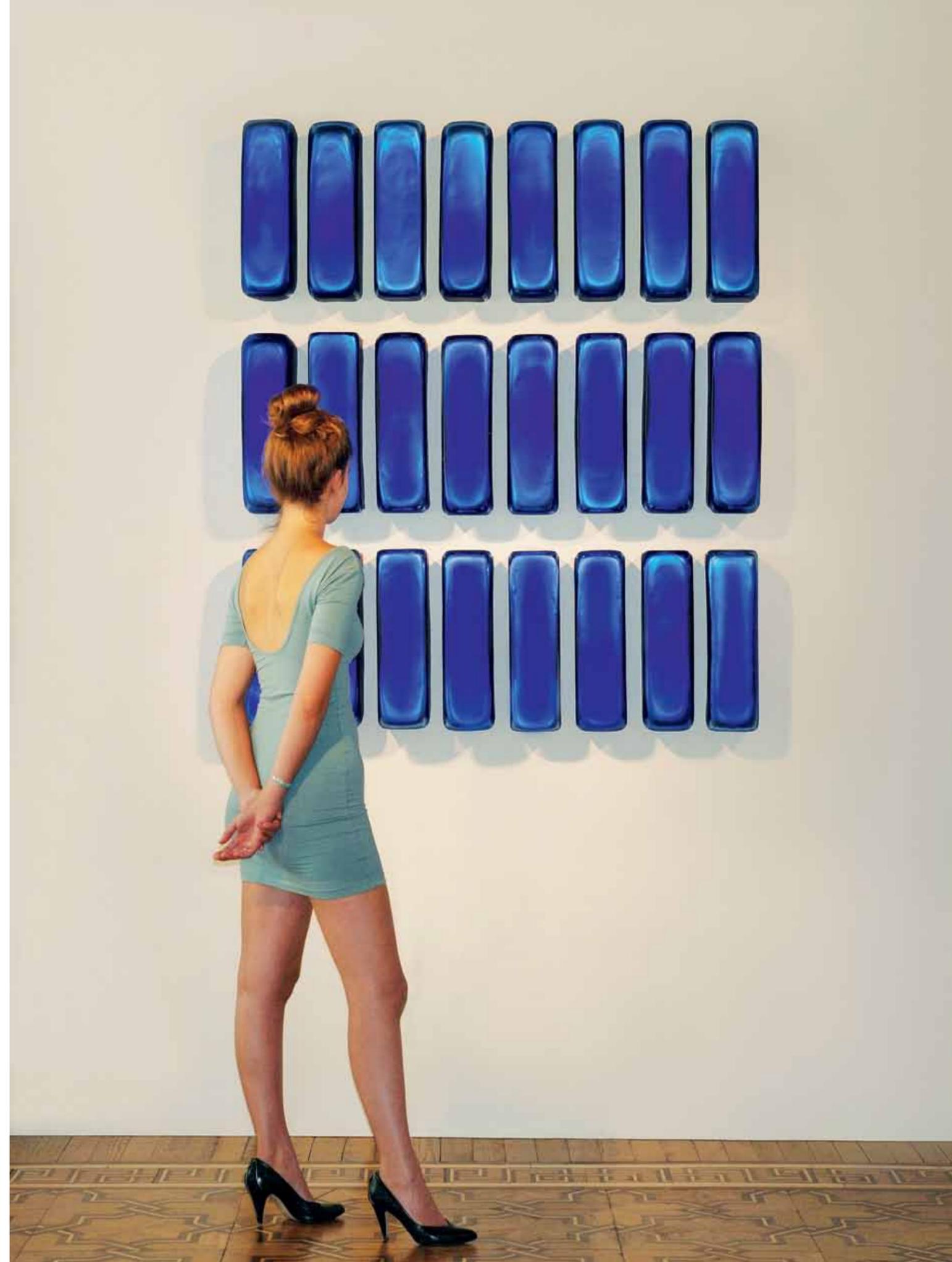
Matter; I would describe today as: something that is physically present, which emphasizes that it is at least something, something everything has been made out of. Solids, liquids, and gases are the most common states of matter that exist on our planet. Everything around us is matter and the atom is considered the most basic unit of matter.

Material; commonly refers to physical present matter, but there is also material which is associated to non-physical present matter, such as spoken words, magnetism and electricity. The material aspect of things, for example an art work, is often not obvious. In the late twentieth century the actual meaning of material became associated with the abstractness of art and that brought the word 'materiality' into the discussions about art works.

Materiality, has become one of the crucial aspects while discussing the characteristics of the media used to create a work of art. The materiality of an object seems to be; our perception of the material the object is made of; the perception of the qualities, the values of the materials as such. The different interpretations of Matter, Material and Materiality, seem to be one of the crucial aspects in understanding the characteristics of the media artists work with.

How do humans perceive matter

Matter values are personal not universal, although there are similarities in perception. Knowledge about the history of a certain material has influence on its perception. Personal experiences with materials





in the past, influence the momentary perception. Material contains qualities which transport emotions and meaning. Qualities such as: color, smell, texture and also, the sheer knowledge about what material the art work has been made of creates an emotional reaction.

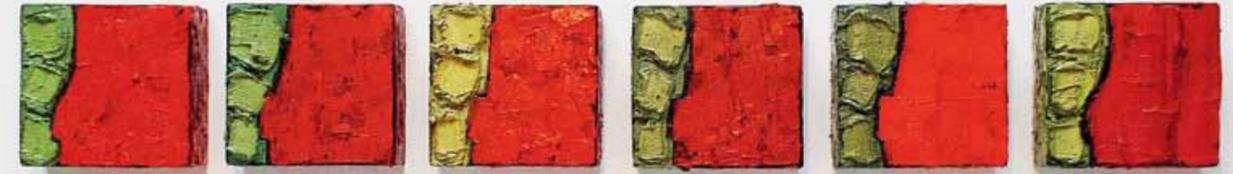
Each series I make, begins with an idea. My main concern is the process of realizing what exactly I want to express, how to communicate and how to realize this in the best way possible with the available material. Once each Box gains physical reality, the perception of its meaning and emotional impact are up to the spectator, including me. Only by realizing my ideas in the object and the completion of a series of Boxes, my thoughts are made visible and can be perceived. Once I have finished my work and I display it, I have no control over the way a viewer will perceive my work. Different people will understand the same thing in a different way.

Three-dimensional art of any kind is a physical fact. The physicality is its most obvious and expressive content. Good art is made to engage the mind of the viewer by reaching his brain in any way possible. The physical aspects of my work emphasize the use of certain materials, matter, because of its specific materiality. The choice of which material I use, underlines the idea which was the foundation for the creating and supports what I want to communicate. New materials are one of the great afflictions of contemporary art. Some artists confuse new materials with new ideas. The 'tradition' of using non-traditional materials and found materials in art goes back awhile, at least since Braques and Picasso's collages and Duchamp's urinal. Today we are accustomed to seeing everyday things in museums or galleries. For me, the good use of non-traditional materials has to transform that material so that it becomes something else than the novelty of the material itself. Generally most artists who are attracted to these new materials are the ones who lack the strictness of mind that would enable them to use the materials well. It takes a good artist to use new materials and make them into a work of art. The danger lies in making the physicality of the materials so important that the material itself becomes the idea of the work.

Objectivity, subjectivity and perceptive reality

We human beings cannot perceive things or events objectively at all. A statement is objective if it is neutral and not influenced by prejudices, feelings and interests. An objective statement is consequently independent of the person who makes this statement. It is only when we could know and understand everything on earth and in the cosmos, that objectively correct observations are theoretically possible. However we are still a long way from this, even the so-called knowledge we previously thought we had gained has been revised many times. So, for example the model of the structure and properties of an atom has drastically changed in the last fifty years. Many times scientists were convinced that we now know 'everything' but our knowledge is constantly expanding. Those things which we recognize as good and correct in science and technology today, can be proven incorrect or incomplete in the future while perhaps being the basis of new findings. Even our perception within the scope of science and technology is therefore also subjective. To my opinion objectivity cannot be achieved, and should therefore also not serve as a goal, we should rather learn how to deal with and see the beauty of subjectivity.

'Perception' is how we view our world: ourselves, others, events. It was not long ago, Alfred Adler who first introduced to psychology the idea



that perception is a matter of subjectivity and personal perspective. Our perception of everything around us (perceptive reality) is purely subjective. There are a number of factors that affect perception. Among them is the personal need to see events a certain way. Our perceptions are not simply how we 'see' things, but what our minds make of what we choose to see and not see in an event. This becomes the 'meaning' of the event, a meaning that is highly personal. In the course of our personal development our own perception changes. It is however true that no one can force us to develop ourselves further. If for example we want to be miserable for the whole of our life because of the end of a relationship, we can do so. The decision is ours alone. How we experience the world is simply our subjectively perceived reality. The nice thing about subjectivity however, is the possibility of influencing the situation ourselves. If my perception is subjective then I, I alone, have all the options of influencing or being influenced in a given situation. I alone decide whether I think that something is good or bad, pleasant or unpleasant, cold or hot, beautiful or ugly.

Many people assume that having this subjective influence on the neutral picture happens in our subconscious, but we also can consciously modify the way we perceive things. We ourselves can influence it, and we also can allow it to be influenced by external forces. But we can only create awareness with the use of language; we have to give words to our observations. These words are being taught to us and they are the tool for our communication with others, but also with ourselves. If we enlarge the amount of words we are capable of using, or if we learn to address the words more specific to the observed thing, our consciousness and therewith our emotional perception will change. As long as we speak the same language, the differences in the way of using words seems relatively small, but as soon as we have to discuss with for example an artist from Japan, the different meaning of similar translated words becomes obvious and communication with words can lead to serious misunderstandings.

Fortunately it seems possible to communicate without words as well, not only by using figuration in an art work, but also with an abstract language. Although colors are of course not understood the same everywhere, there are similarities in how we perceive for example the color red. The subjective perception of colors has been extensively studied, with a focus on single colors or on combinations of a few colors. It is a challenge to understand the subjective perception of colors, but it is obvious that the emotional impact of color on humans is an important factor in how we perceive our surroundings. The sight of blood causes excitement in primates, it means something important. We therefore use red for important things, like Stop signs, green can calm people down. Colors seem to have subconscious effects of which however we can become aware, although the origin, why, most often can only be guessed. But even our own perceptions are not exactly the same on a day by day basis; they depend on Location and Time. For a great part, the way we for example perceive the exact same object on different occasions, depends on our own personal situation of that moment, and on the space which surrounds the object.

Commonly we are not consciously aware of all the factors involved and, although perception seems to be so personal, there are general tendencies in how we humans perceive our surroundings, the things we encounter. Our mind is capable to create awareness about our own individual possibilities for perception, but it needs to be developed gradually. It is often astonishing how little time we take to experience consciously the emotional impact an object has and how little we consider the meaning certain materials carry within them. If we would experience, perceive, materials and our surroundings more consciously, and if we would integrate the concrete application of these thoughts to our everyday lives, we would be more aware of our own existence.

Knowledge about how matter will mainly be perceived and awareness how I perceive it myself, is the main influence in the choice of the matter, material, which I use for the objects, the Boxes, I am going to make.

MARINA ABRAMOVIĆ

Conversation between Marina Abramović, Peter Loder Meyer, Sarah Gold, Karlyn De Jongh, and Rene Rietmeyer

Palazzo Cavalli Franchetti, Venice, Italy, 4 June 2009

Marina Abramović (1946 in Belgrade, Yugoslavia, now Serbia). Performance artist since the early 1970s. Lives in New York City.*

Peter Loder Meyer: I saw you in the 1980s in Bonn doing an impressive performance with Ulay. You sat at a table for 24 hours. In terms of everyday life a completely boring action, but even today I still think about it and it still has an emotional impact on me. I wonder why you call your art Body Art; I think it is "Emotion Art". Are emotions the material you work with?

Marina Abramović: You see, at the beginning of the 70s, it was Vito Acconci who invented this title 'Body Art'. And he doesn't come from the visual art tradition: he comes from writing. He was a writer, and a poet before that. So, he actually said, "The body is the place where things happen." And the body is my place where things happen, for me. He actually supplied the title in the 70s: Body Art. But then in the 70s this term was not used anymore. Actually, not for a long time. So then Body Art actually became Performance Art. But then, Performance Art is such an unclear title: especially if you see different countries, performance can be, you know, performing a music piece, it can be a performance of dance or theater. So it's not really an exact term for my kind of work. We'll never really find the right title. But it's not just about emotions. I mean Performance Art. If somebody asks me, how I would define the question "What is Performance Art?", I would say each artist will give his own different statement. What I can explain about performance is the following: it is a mental and physical construction, which I step into, in front of an audience, in a specific time and place. And then the performance actually happens; it's really based on energy values. It is very important that there's a public present; I could not do it in my private life. This is not considered performance. Plus, I wouldn't have the energy to do it. So for me it is really important that actually energy comes from the audience and kind of translates through me, like I filter it, and let it go back to the audience. The more audience, the better the performance gets. That's because there is more energy you can work with. Of course the emotional element is there too, but there are so many other elements. They have to be unrehearsed and they have to be very direct and pure. They really have to confront your physical and mental limits. At the same time, for me and especially now, I'm very interested in pieces with a long duration: for me, time



is very important. This is why I'm actually involved now in developing my performances. That's why I like your title. Let's talk about time, consciousness, and existence. It's quite interesting.

Karlyn De Jongh: Yesterday we walked around the exhibition upstairs with Joseph Kosuth and he said about Rene Rietmeyer's work that "it suffers from aesthetics." What Kosuth seems to have meant with saying that the work is "too beautiful", is that the beauty is sort of in the way of the possible meaning of the work, of what it is the artist wants to express. In your work you use your own body as a medium. You have a very beautiful body; you are a very beautiful woman. Do you ever feel that this beauty is in the way of what you want to express? Do you think this beauty affects the reception of your work by the viewer?

MA: I don't think that. It's kind of a complex question. First of all, for a very long time, I worked on a piece dealing with this problem: *Art must be beautiful, Artist must be beautiful*. This piece was, however, doing the exact opposite: not talking of beauty and actually denying the idea of beauty, because actually I really think if art is only beautiful, it's really short, short-lived, limited in a conceptual way. For me, this whole idea that art has to have many lives is very important. Every society and every culture has to take part of the meaning of the work as they need it. So, sometimes it is about beauty; sometimes it is about symmetry; sometimes it has to be disturbing; sometimes it has to be political. And other ways have to be, you know, social. There are so many layers that one artwork has to have. If it is only just beauty and just aesthetics it is not enough. So, of course, it's an obstacle in my work, but I hope my work is not just that. And, you know, I'm sixty-three, I don't think I'm beautiful as far as my body is concerned anymore. My body, it's older. It's good to be older, so it's not about that. But it doesn't matter because I don't see the body that way. In my private life I could be very self-conscious, but the moment I am there, in front of an audience, it doesn't matter that my body is old, not old or beautiful or ugly, or whatever. It's about the context and the meaning what you want to say, it's about ideas and not about the visual part at all.

Sarah Gold: But a person is not just a visual part: it's the expression of the body, the expression of the face. And that's a lot.

MA: Yes, but this is charisma. We're talking about charisma. We're not talking about anything else. That's another thing. Performance is a



very difficult art form. It's one of the most difficult: you have to deal with presence. You have to be there, here and now, one hundred percent. If you're not there, one hundred percent, the public is like a dog: they could sense an insecurity and just leave. What I mean is: you can perform in front of a public with your body, but your mind can be in Honolulu. For the public it's all the same, you can look at the performance, but you can be, who knows where, answering your Blackberry. In that case you're not there. The idea is how to actually create a piece so that the consciousness, your body and the moment of Now is there. Then you really have something; then you really have a dialogue. Not only you, but also the public has to be there. This is why in staging dangerous moments, or staging things that even the artist has never done, there is fear because he doesn't know how he is going to succeed. That keeps you in the present time, you're not going to wander somewhere else, because you're there with the artist and the artist is there in the space too. So it's about here and now. You know: the past we know, it's already happened; the future is not clear. But the present is the only thing we can deal with. And that's escaping us so much; the performance is really about presence. If you escape presence during your performance, your performance is gone. There are so many bad performances in the world because it's hard to do a good one.

SG: I think a part of the quality of your performances was the integrity, which was visually present, that was the aura, the charisma. I saw a photograph of you as a young girl in 1970 and already there it was present within you.

MA: But again, it is always you, the mind and the body. You have to be there. There is a beautiful sentence from Bruce Naumann that he always likes to say: "Art is a matter of life and death." It sounds melodramatic, but it is so true. If you take whatever you do as a matter of life and death, being there one hundred percent, then things really happen. Less than one hundred percent is not good art. It's so hard to do it, but it is the only way. And this means: no compromises.

PL: In an interview you made once a statement that if you had a starship to leave the galaxy with, you would do it, because you are always interested in going beyond the limits. What are the limits you're still fighting with and would like to go beyond? What is the greatest challenge, or what is the strongest fight or struggle you have with limitation? Is it the materiality of our body?

MA: No, it is not about materiality at all, that is really the most unknown notion. It's actually sub-consciousness and un-consciousness. That's what is really the most interesting. And how to understand that? To me it is so important to introduce time in performance, because our lives are becoming shorter and shorter. This is why I'm now struggling to make performances longer and longer. I really like that moment when the performance becomes life itself. That is really something I'm working on. I'm doing a retrospective next year at MoMA. The title of the retrospective is "The Artist is Present". I'm literally performing three months every single day. And I would like somehow to find a system so that the performance would become life. That it's actually timeless; it becomes just timeless. I always say to the audience: "I don't want you to spend time with me looking at my work; I want you with me, to forget about time. Kind of open up the space and just that moment of here and now, of nothing, there is no future and there is no past. And that you can extend eternity." That is really my biggest wish.

PL: The limit you would like to go beyond is time?

MA: No, it is about being present. And being present longer than... You see, there are so many different meditation traditions in different religions all around the world and they all talk about the same thing. How to get into that moment of Now? That moment of Now that is always escaping us. For an artist performance is a tool; it is not an aim. Like any other tool, like a painter has his tool, a carpenter has his tool. Performance is a tool. Nothing other than a tool. For me it is the tool I choose for bringing me to that moment.

PL: Do you think that artists nowadays are better able to do this than religion, meditation methods or rituals are? Is it more fitting to our culture nowadays?

MA: Yes, it's very funny. When you talk about spirituality in art it is very badly received. The artist doesn't want to talk about spirituality; you don't talk about these kinds of things. It's too spooky. It's something like New Age and it doesn't look good. Older forms are already exhausted and we don't believe anymore. Religion has become an institution we don't believe in anymore: we know it's wrong and more corrupt than anything else. And real ascetic traditions of the past are not alive anymore. So, there we don't have any examples in order to actually take it into our own exercise. We have to make our own system based on experience and different traditions. To me, the really important cultures that changed my life are the Aboriginals and Tibetans. Aboriginals, because they are really made that way; they're born like that. But the Tibetans have their techniques to get there. And from these two traditions—to which I exposed myself for a long period of time—I actually could learn some techniques. These I can introduce in my work. And not only I, but also the young artists can do it. For me it's very important to not just do it for myself. At one point in your life, you have gained some experience and you want to pass it on to a younger generation. I think this is a very important task of an artist. This is why I'm always talking about the artist as a servant of society. We have to see our function that way. This is why building ego or... It becomes a kind of Hollywood-star look, which is really fake. Especially in Italy, I think it's amazing, you have this kind of star-looking artist that you can't even talk to because he is God. He doesn't want to talk to you because he's better than everybody else. This will completely destroy the work. It is not you that is important; it is the work that is important. That's the big misunderstanding. The best pieces of artwork in the medieval times, you didn't even know the name of the artist. That's much more healthy for an artist, instead of building that kind of stardom image. That's why the economic crisis is so good now. It is the best thing ever happened to art. Too much money—and money becoming a commodity—is never good. It never amounts to anything good. And it's funny because, the more the economic crisis stays on this course, the more performance... So these are good times, again.

KDJ: You just mentioned that the here and now, the present is very important to you. Also in your statements you often write "in a given space." Would you say that time and space are in a way materials that you work with in your performances?

MA: Time and space are quite important. If you're talking in the here and now, the actual time should not exist. So, at the same time you



have a contradiction. Because you have to have a space where things have to happen in order to determine this space inside where things happen. And then you have to allot a certain amount of time that you are going to give to yourself to make things happen, in which things are going to happen. It's very important. If I say, for example, I will be performing for ten hours, I don't even know what it looks like, ten hours. So you enter a kind of unknown construction, which you created for yourself. But then you have to have the willpower to actually keep your word. No matter how difficult it is. It's a very important task. It's so easy to give up, but not to give up... You give it a certain time. You don't give up; you do it, no matter what. And then in this period of time—it can be ten hours or five or whatever it is—regardless of everything that could happen on the exterior, for example when the electricity goes out or everybody has left the space... the performance should not finish. No matter what, you have to do that period of time at this site. It is very important for your self-respect.

SG: You are such a different person than I am. I have difficulties putting a needle in my own skin, just the pain, just the trying to destroy my body, I could not do it. And I see you taking medication voluntarily, torturing your body. Are you never worried that you might destroy your own body? You seem to have had this fatalism: "who cares? If I die, I die. If I live, I live."

MA: You have to remember that both of my parents are national heroes. Just so you know. So, it must be something with the genes. But apart from that: because you pay so much attention to the body, the body is not important; it's the mind that is important.

SG: But you need your body to live a long time. Don't you want to live a long time? We spoke with Roman Opalka yesterday and he says, "I'm not stupid: I'm not just painting numbers, I'm also alive. I have sex, I drink..."

MA: I don't drink, I don't smoke, and I don't take any... I exercise four times a week with a trainer. I am very careful about where I'm going. But this is another thing than the work. The work is something other than my private life. Okay, let me explain this: You have to understand that, when you do the work, you do it from your super-self, which is different than your ordinary self. You have to make this distinction, because it is not my private self who is doing this. The moment I decide I'm entering this construction I make, you're not your little self anymore, you know the one that can feel the pain, or doesn't want to cut the meat. When I cut myself, cutting garlic in the kitchen, I cry. But if I do it in front of the public, I do it for a purpose. I do it for the idea... I'm doing it with the purpose of giving the message to others. You're actually unhurt. You're totally protected. I lay on ice, naked for half an hour. And the doctor told me that my kidneys would just... you know... I never had anything.

Life's just getting longer. The mind can make you sick, can make you healthy, can make you jump out of the window. It can make you tremendously happy. Everything is about mind. The body is a tool. And the mind controls it. Our mind is the subject we need to understand, how to use it. We have to ask: "Why am I doing this?" That's much more important. It's not a little girl who wants to spin... First of all, did you ask yourself why so many other cultures and shamanism use the techniques of, or even go to face the kind of clinical dying ex-



perience? They do that. Why do they do that? Why do they cut the body? Why do you think they're doing that? It's very easy in our lives to do things we like. If you're doing things you only like, you'll never go anywhere. You will always repeat the same patterns. Things just happen over and over again. But if you do things you fear and you do things you don't know, there is a very big chance that you will actually open up your consciousness. One thing is confronting your own fear. If you're afraid of pain, this is exactly what you have to do to find out what this pain is. When you open the door to pain, you'll find out that you actually might be able to control it. You'll be free from the fear of pain—which is a great feeling. This is why the Shamans are doing it. So, go and stick some needles in your body, it's a good exercise!

PL: I can imagine that your performances really can change peoples' lives. What kind of reactions do you get from your audience? Do people write to you? Do they tell you something about what it did to them?

MA: The piece I did at the Sean Kelly Gallery¹, when I didn't eat for twelve days... You see, this is a very important piece for me, because the idea was that I purified myself. Can I purify the space? Can I change the molecules in the air? In the way when people come to see me, it is a kind of time-stop: it can be three minutes, five seconds. In New York people don't have time for anything, but they came and stayed for six or seven hours, the longest they could stay. There were twelve thousand people. And I was so surprised that at the end of this thing I had boxes of things that people had left me: handkerchiefs, necklaces, and little messages. I didn't do anything. I would just stand there and look at them. That's it, you know. But it is about presence. I was really standing and looking at them. And that makes all the difference. They could see me as I could see them. It's very minimal. It's all about energy, which is invisible in a way. But if you really go through purification, you elevate your consciousness and that really affects the audience. In an invisible way, but it is true. It's a huge work you have to do to create that kind of aura in the space. Without it, it doesn't

work. And to be able to do this... You see, in these days I'm standing all the time on the edge of the platform. At this edge of the platform are the ladders with knives. You see, I'm always standing on the edge. It's just the moment that I will not be there with my mind and body, I will fall on these knives and cut myself. So, that exact point of danger is what puts my mind and body in the here and now time. The public knows it and they are there with me. This is the point. When you just sit on a chair, it's not there: you have to get to that edge; you have to really... It's nothing new. In the Sufi dance technique there is an exercise where they spin round and round. In this spinning around you have the possibility to really lose your consciousness. But you have the guys outside with swords cutting the air. If you lose the balance of consciousness, you'll fall outside the circle and be cut in pieces. You have to do the spinning and you have the possibility to actually lose control. But at the same time you have to have an enormous control of the mind not to do it, because you are going to die. When you create this kind of edgy situation in performance, I stage that situation in order to get to the point of elevating the mind. But when you elevate your mind, automatically it is sent to the public. That's why it becomes so emotional. This is why people come and cry. It's kind of the totality of the situation, if I can explain...

Rene Rietmeyer: It seems that the communication you have with your public is not just by your performances but also by spoken words. So, beyond your performances you do communicate through well-spoken words, and it does transport what you want to communicate during your performance.

MA: No, you see, this is very wrong. Because, when you see the piece and you don't have anything to do with art, you just come from the street... You have to get it emotionally. You have to get it in your stomach and not in your brain. Later on you can talk to the artist, you can understand the theory. There is so much art where you have to read lots of theory in order to understand the work. And if you don't read this theory, there is nothing there. And actually the work is becoming illustration to the theory. This is the art I don't accept. You have to have the art; you have to feel with your stomach. Then you can go in the theory. Now we're talking. I have to be able in the performance to tell all this without saying this: you have to feel it. Later on you can talk. Without feeling, it doesn't work. You know, I was always asked, "How do you know it is a good work of art?" It is very simple: You sit in the restaurant and you have a strong feeling that somebody is watching you. You turn around and you realize somebody is watching you. This sensation sometimes happens. But if you come to a space and you have the feeling somebody is watching you, and you turn around and it is a work of art. So, what is a good work of art? That energy that turns you to look behind. There has to be energy.

SG: I read about your ninety days walk on the Chinese wall, and I found it a beautiful present to yourself. Not to serve the public; not for us, but just for yourself. Does that performance differ from the work in the Sean Kelly Gallery where you wanted to communicate with the spectator?

MA: No, it was not just for myself. It was conditioning myself in order to make a work of art. After this I made lots of objects, transitory objects, which the public has to use. I could not do that if I did not walk the wall. *The Chinese Wall* was the only performance where the audience was not present. At the same time, I wanted to experience

how I can walk on an energy grid system. And if you're all the time at the edge of sleepiness, you can have some kind of transformation of yourself. It would be the state of mind in which you get new ideas. So, this was the conditioning for me, not the performance itself. After this performance I created a series of works, which were actually for the public. Because I understood it is not enough that the artist goes through an experience; the public has to go through an experience as well. The objects were created with quartz, copper or iron; they all have a certain energy. You have to spend time with them before you can get to certain experiences. Now in Manchester, I am doing this whole new thing, *The Drill*. We never spend time educating the public. The public doesn't have a clue how to look at something for a long duration of time without getting bored. How we can go beyond the boredom? How we can see things when nothing is happening? So, this is my big task now: to teach the public to do that.

SG: Opalka said that as soon as he has the feeling he cannot stand proud in front of his canvas, he will stop working. Will you stop?

MA: I have a big problem with Opalka, because there is something wrong there. You see, Roman Opalka was very strict about his work—not just him, but a lot of American minimalism as well. Roman Opalka made a body of canvases enough at the end of his life. He had two sizes: one traveling size and one that can go through his studio door. He paints his numbers from seven in the morning until four. It has all the ritual and process. And when his paint runs out, he stops painting. My really big question that I only started to ask after I actually went through these Aboriginal and Tibetan experiences is: To me it is not clear what will happen by doing this kind of very meditative work. What will happen if you change? He is not expecting to change. He is not accepting transformation. That is totally wrong. So, it has become a very bureaucratic thing. You are producing, producing, producing... But this is like stamping eggs, you know, for the supermarket. Or putting stamps on the envelopes for the post-office. What happens if you retransform through this process? Meditation techniques are made for transformation; they are elevating the mind. Opalka is doing all that, which is great, but what happens if this brings you to this other side? Then you have to accept that. I don't see that he's accepting that. He still has this kind of factory idea. That's really not right. He's not just a different type of person; the aim is transformation. Art is a tool to transform the human mind. The aim is to elevate the mind.

KDJ: A few weeks ago I was interviewing Tehching Hsieh in his apartment in Brooklyn, USA. He seems to be an important person for you as you dedicated your current project in Manchester to him. He did a several one-year performances. He told me he is not producing art anymore, that he is tired and just goes in life. Do you think you will reach a point that you will no longer do performances and just live your life?

MA: I'm making this work *Abramović's Choice* which I dedicate to Tehching. He's a big master. But it's not that he doesn't work anymore, this is a complete misunderstanding. He made the most magnificent performances over a five-year period, each performance a year. After this he transformed. That's why he's not working. He is making life. That's why I believe him and not Opalka, for exactly the same reason.

SG: That you accept changes means that you are flexible. Does that mean that in your last performance we will be allowed to see you dying?

MA: I'm making a theater play with Bob Wilson in which I'm doing a rehearsal of my own funeral. Why do you have to be dying? Dying is not about death. It's about the luminosity. It's not about dying; it is about luminosity. Luminosity is the most important thing for a human being to have.

PL: To come back to Roman Opalka. You said, when a transformation happens he doesn't accept it. But when it really happens then you have no choice, then you have to accept it. Then his work would change anyway.

MA: This is a totally good point. But it is also strange: the mind has to be open. Somehow the artists of that generation, especially the minimalists, have something that prevents the mind from being open in this way. They are stuck in repetition, in a hermeneutic system. I don't mind if you don't accept change, even if it is a period of time...

SG: When you accept those changes, the events that occurred in your life, they must have had certain results. Did meeting Joseph Beuys or Hermann Nitsch change anything for you in the early stages?

MA: I don't think so. You see: I'm not inspired by artists; artists are always inspired by somebody else. I always like to be inspired by the source. The sources for me are waterfalls, volcanoes, earthquakes, the shamans, spiritual masters; they were really on the source. This is what artists get inspiration from, but then it is already second hand. I was inspired by living with the Aboriginals. That changed my life tremendously. I understood so many more things from living with these people, more directly than being inspired by artists.

PL: How important is it for your performances to be connected to natural time rhythms? I've read that you prefer to finish your performances on nights when there is a full moon.

MA: It would be ridiculous not to because there is so much energy. Actually I'll finish before full moon night. It is not constructive to do something after a full moon night: the energy just goes down. It would be ridiculous.

RR: I asked On Kawara the question: "Would you have done anything in your life to get more satisfaction out of your own personal existence?" What is your answer to that question?

MA: Yes. Actually I'm a disaster now. I'm just divorcing, so it's a bad time for me. There is a lot I missed; I didn't pay attention to my private life. I'm married to my art. There are certain types of sacrifices to be made. You can't have everything. I don't have children; I don't have any kind of normal life, because it's impossible. But I really, really love what I'm doing. That's all I have actually.

¹ *The House with the Ocean View* at the Sean Kelly Gallery, New York, November 15 - December 21, 2002.